INCLUDES PREVIEWS FOR WISCONSIN PAGE 38 ✦ RICE PAGE 47

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2026 PRESEASON FOOTBALL ISSUE

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Quarterback CJ Carr is among Notre Dame's biggest and most important keys to success in 2026

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Lou Somogyi, *Editor 1985-2021*

MANAGING EDITOR
Steve Downey

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Stu Coman, Matt Herb,
Cathy Jones, Chris Riffer

STAFF WRITERS
Eric Hansen, Tyler Horka,
Tyler James, Jack Soble

RECRUITING REPORTERS
Mike Singer, Kyle Kelly

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Todd D. Burlage, Jim Lefebvre

PHOTOGRAPHY
Michael Miller, Chad Weaver

COVER PHOTO
Michael Miller

DESIGN
Jeanette Blankenship,
Chris Miller

✦ ✦ ✦

PUBLISHER
Jeanette Blankenship

BUSINESS ANALYST
Sarah Boone

CIRCULATION
Beverly Taylor

ADVERTISING SALES
Maria Taustine
(502) 552-4390

MARKETING COORDINATOR
Elena Rehberg

CUSTOMER SERVICE
Josh Mattes, Elena Rehberg, Cathy Jones
(800) 421-7751

✦ ✦ ✦

BLUE & GOLD ILLUSTRATED (USPS 667650) is published 18 times annually — weekly Sept.-Dec. and monthly Jan.-Aug. (no issues in March, June and July) — by Coman Publishing Co., a division of On3 Media, Inc., located at 922 Broad St., Suite D, Durham, NC 27705 (www.comanpub.com). A one-year (18 issues) subscription is $74.95.

BLUE & GOLD ILLUSTRATED (ISSN 0746-2557) is printed by The Papers in Milford, Ind.

Postmaster: Send address changes to Blue & Gold Illustrated, P.O. Box 2331, Durham, NC 27702.

Periodical postage paid at Durham, NC 27702 and additional offices.

For advertising or subscription information call 1-919-688-0218 or write **BLUE & GOLD ILLUSTRATED**, P.O. Box 2331, Durham, NC 27702.

ON3

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

SETTING THE AGENDA

The offensive line remains front and center in coordinator Mike Denbrock's continuing development

✦ PAGE 18

PHOTO COURTESY WISCONSIN ATHLETICS

MAKE OR BREAK

Luke Fickell begins defining season at Wisconsin

✦ STARTS ON PAGE 38

✦ INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Upon Further Review ✦ Todd D. Burlage 4
Golden Gamut ✦ Tyler Horka 5
Fan Forum 6
Under The Dome 8
Fall Camp Offense Overview 18
Fall Camp Defense Overview 21
Brauntae Johnson 24
BGI's Top 25 for 2026 26
Senior Class Review 32
Freshman Class Projections 36
Wisconsin and Notre Dame Rosters 45
Opponent On Deck: Rice 47
Football Recruiting 48
Football Commit Profiles 50
Recruiting Roundup/2027 Master List 63
Blue & Gold Marketplace 63
Men's Basketball 65
Women's Basketball 66
2025-26 In Review 67
ND Sports: Fall Preview 71
Irish In The Pros 73
Irish Echoes ✦ Jim Lefebvre 74
First And Last ✦ Tyler James 76
Off The Dome ✦ Jack Soble 77
The Deep Read ✦ Eric Hansen 78

THE NEXT ISSUE OF BLUE & GOLD ILLUSTRATED WILL BE MAILED ON SEPT. 7 ***(SEE NOTE ON PG 11)***

2026 NOTRE DAME FOOTBALL SCHEDULE

Sept. 6	Sept. 12	Sept. 19	Sept. 26	Oct. 3	Oct. 10	Oct. 17	Oct. 31	Nov. 7	Nov. 14	Nov. 21	Nov. 28
vs. Wisconsin	Rice	Michigan St.	at Purdue	at N. Carolina	Stanford	at BYU	vs. Navy	Miami	Boston College	SMU	at Syracuse

We Appreciate The Offer, But Stay Home

Feeling empathy for Brian Kelly, or fully trusting anything the former Irish head coach had to say, was difficult at times this summer when he took to the internet and airwaves to discuss his messy firing at LSU last season and to revisit his time in South Bend.

Perhaps in an effort to polish his tarnished image and/or to revive a coaching career, Kelly grabbed a few media opportunities in recent months to extend an olive branch by celebrating the great job that Irish head coach Marcus Freeman is doing as his successor at Notre Dame.

Adding more curiosity to the unexpected Fighting Irish love fest, Kelly also hinted that he would like to return to Notre Dame for a visit this fall and reunite with Freeman.

Former Irish head coach Brian Kelly has said he would like to visit a Notre Dame practice and see Marcus Freeman this fall.

PHOTO BY BILL PANZICA

In a July episode of "The Independent: A Notre Dame Football Podcast," Kelly told show hosts Pete Sampson and Matt Fortuna that he is "100 percent supporting what Freeman is doing," and Kelly wants to stop by an Irish practice to lend support and "to be visible for a day."

Forever ego-driven and well-known for being self-serving, Kelly makes it tricky to decipher his actual motives for wanting to visit campus to support a program that he ditched in November 2021.

"I'm not in there to look at what they're running offensively or defensively," Kelly shared. "I just want to show that I have 100 percent faith and confidence in what they're doing and how they're doing it."

For background, with Kelly as their head coach, the Notre Dame players and program were awaiting their postseason destination in November 2021 after an 11-1 regular season, with a potential spot in the four-team playoff still in play.

But, instead of sticking it *out* with his players, Kelly stuck it *to* his players in the form of a three-minute sayonara speech, followed immediately by a flight to Baton Rouge to sign a $95 million contract.

"Men," Kelly said during a hastily gathered team meeting after news of his departure began to leak out. "Let me first apologize for the late-night text, and, more importantly, for not being able to share the news with you in person that I will be leaving Notre Dame."

Kelly pulled Freeman out of Cincinnati and made him the Notre Dame defensive coordinator in January 2021.

So undoubtedly, Freeman will forever be indebted to Kelly for the coordinator opportunity that led to his first head coaching job with Notre Dame almost five years ago.

"It's extraordinary that a football coach with no head coaching experience has been able to step in the job and do as well as Marcus has," Kelly continued. "I had 19 years of being a head coach, and I felt like the water was up to my nose at times at Notre Dame. I have such respect for Marcus and what he's been able to do in that role."

Kelly spent 12 seasons on the Notre Dame sideline. He won 113 games with the Irish and will be the program's all-time winningest coach for a long time. Perhaps a commemorative statue outside the stadium might even be in order someday.

But for now, because of his own undoing, Kelly — who recently took a job with CBS as the color commentator for Mountain West Conference football games this coming season — remains toxic in South Bend. So, why does he think a campus visit would be appropriate?

"I want our fans to know, the Notre Dame fans, that I'm 100 percent supporting what they're doing and how they're doing it," Kelly said. "Not that they need me to validate in any way."

If nothing else, Kelly got that last part right.

The cynic in me isn't buying that Kelly wants to visit campus to support Marcus Freeman and the Notre Dame mission. Nope, the cynic in me believes such a reunion would be a PR ploy for Kelly, 64, to rebuild his image as a gracious guy and to help resurrect his coaching career after the selfish departure from Notre Dame and the disastrous three and a half seasons at LSU.

Make no mistake, Freeman would manage a visit from his former boss just fine, but what for?

With all the pieces in place to win the first national title at Notre Dame since 1988, there is too much at stake between now and the season opener Sept. 6, to invite that disruptive circus.

"This is probably the best offseason that we've had so far," Freeman said to open the spring football season. "We're at a different level than I've previously seen us."

So, let's keep it that way. ✦

Todd D. Burlage has been a writer for *Blue & Gold Illustrated* since July 2005. He can be reached at toddburlage@gmail.com

Saying Goodbye After An Unforgettable Five Years

I had plans to host my father in South Bend for Miami versus Notre Dame in November. He had plans to tag along with me to Syracuse for the Fighting Irish's regular-season finale in his home state of New York a few weeks later. He was born and raised in Auburn, 30 miles southwest of Syracuse.

He visited me for Notre Dame's game against North Carolina State last fall, and he was hooked. Again. He grew up a Notre Dame fan because of his father, and he rediscovered some of his affinity for the Fighting Irish by simply spending one home game weekend in South Bend. It was the first time he'd done so in my five years on the beat and the first Notre Dame game he'd been to, period, since the 1978 Cotton Bowl.

My father, Michael, went to a game at Notre Dame Stadium for the first time ever on Oct. 11, 2025. The Irish beat North Carolina State, 36-7.

PHOTO COURTESY TYLER HORKA

It'll likely be the last one he attends for quite some time. Again.

It'll make no sense for him to be in South Bend for the Miami game or in Syracuse for the game against the Orange. I won't be there either. And the reason I won't *does* make all the sense in the world.

I'm going home.

The next time my dad visits to see me do what I love and what I've done every year since I graduated college in 2018 he won't need to get on an airplane. He can just get in the car and drive a few hours to the very place I called home for four years until graduation.

The University of Texas at Austin.

As the years went on covering Notre Dame for *Blue & Gold Illustrated*, it became increasingly clear I'd only ever leave that post for one other college beat writing destination — Texas. The great folks at Inside Texas came calling this summer and presented me with an opportunity I could not pass up. Opportunities, plural, is more appropriate. I get to continue covering a national championship contender and dedicate each and every one of my fall Saturdays to a sport that's meant so much to me for my entire life, and I get to do it surrounded by the people who have always meant the most to me in the place that has almost meant the most to me. It's a no-brainer.

That doesn't take anything away from the people I met and the things I did investing all of myself into Fighting Irish football for the last half decade.

On that note, wow, five years? Where did those go? It feels like yesterday and an eternity ago, all at once, when Brian Kelly drove off and ditched Notre Dame at the end of my first year on the beat.

Since then, Marcus Freeman has endured and experienced everything a head coach can short of winning a national championship. He even rallied his team well enough to play for one in the same season in which the Irish lost, at home, to Northern Illinois, marking the first time ever a team participating in the Mid-American Conference at the time of kickoff had ever beaten Notre Dame. The Irish were previously 8-0.

Freeman was also the first Notre Dame head coach to ever start his tenure 0-3. You'd never know it with the amount of ranked victories he's acquired and stellar recruits he's gotten to sign on the dotted line, pledging their allegiance to his program and immersing themselves in all it has to offer. Which is quite a lot.

I didn't play for Freeman, obviously, but I did have the pleasure of sitting front and center for each and every one of his press conferences since he took over for Kelly in 2022. I'm going to miss that. I'm going to miss so much about pulling onto Notre Dame's campus on a Saturday in September, October, November and even December (how about that College Football Playoff game in 2024? What a spectacle!) knowing something special was bound to happen at some point that day. At many points. There is so much that goes into and comes with being at a Notre Dame football game. A lot of it will stick with me forever.

I attended 61 of the 67 Notre Dame games that have been played since the start of the 2021 season. While that run has come to an end, something tells me I'll find my way to one sometime in the future. When? I don't know. But if my dad can do it after so many years then I can, too. And I will. Heck, maybe the Longhorns and Irish will even have something to say about it and meet in the CFP this season. That'd be poetic, just like the first college football game I ever covered as a credentialed media member was when Notre Dame went to Texas in 2016.

Life has a weird way of working out. This move sure works out for me and my loved ones. I won't ever forget the people and places I grew fond of in Indiana, and I will see them again down the line.

But for now, I'm queuing up "Amarillo by Morning" for the moving truck. Then "Texas On My Mind" after that. It's time for a new beginning back where it all started. ✦

Tyler Horka has been a writer for *Blue & Gold Illustrated* since July 2021. We wish him well in his new endeavor.

FAN FORUM

BE HEARD! **Send your letters to:** steve.downey@on3.com
or mail to: *Blue & Gold Illustrated,* P. O. Box 2331, Durham, NC 27702

FAMILY TRADITION

I'm a longtime subscriber to *Blue & Gold Illustrated* who grew up a HUGE ND fan because of my father. He went to Notre Dame via the benefit of the military "G.I. Bill" after he served in WWII. My father always boasted that, when he was an ND student (1946-50), under the leadership of head coach Frank Leahy, the Irish football team NEVER lost a game! (Look it up!)

He moved our family out to Southern California in the 1960s where his eight Irish Catholic kids learned to DISLIKE (our mother taught us not to use the word "hate") the USC Trojans!

In 1974, I sat with my father, in the Coliseum, and watched the Trojans beat the Irish in that embarrassing 55-24 loss.

Fifty years later to the day on Nov. 30, 2024, I sat in the Coliseum with my own son to watch Christian Gray and Xavier Watts return consecutive pick sixes to ensure a victory against the team I HATE (... err ... DISLIKE ... sorry, Mom).

All that being said, I've passed on the Notre Dame lineage to my own kids and, thanks to *Blue & Gold Illustrated*, we now have a family tradition. Since I am now an "old man," I still purchase your fantastic magazine via USPS mail!

So, you should know, that when each "envelope" covered issue of *Blue & Gold* arrives in our mail box, the whole family gathers and makes their best guess as to who will be on the cover! A great family tradition!

Keep up the good work, and GO IRISH!!!

Patrick Walker
Placentia, Calif.

WAY OF LIFE

In the last issue of *Blue & Gold Illustrated*, there was an article about former Irish assistant coach Greg Blache. Us old-timers will never forget his quote in "Go Irish," now known as *Blue & Gold Illustrated*.

"Any football team can be beat. Every so often even a Notre Dame team can be beaten, but you can never beat Notre Dame. Because Notre Dame is a way of life."

Frank Mastrangelo
West Pittsburg, Pa.

IT'S ON THE TEE

The football is on the tee,
A new season, oh golly gee,
It's packing all your hopes, dreams,
and possibilities,
so, get a good grip on thee.
A shrill whistle splits the air, and the
football ball is off the tee.
The strong of heart you are just about
to see
You're singing, waving, and sending
a volley cheer on high,
All of the season yet to come, my oh my.

Ed Fechtel

FROM THE WEBSITE

BLUEANDGOLD.com

During the summer, ESPN released its list of the top college football coaches for the 2026 season. At No. 4 was Notre Dame's Marcus Freeman, who was listed behind only No. 1 Curt Cignetti of Indiana, No. 2 Kirby Smart of Georgia and No. 3 Ryan Day of Ohio State — all three of whom have won at least one national title in the past five years.

Here is a sampling of what Fighting Irish fans had to say about Freeman's ranking on our message board at BlueandGold.com.

Fuller: Is it a blessing or a curse to have the highest rated coach to not win a championship? What makes him the best coach of the 0 championships group?

I don't think anyone can argue with the top 3, all 3 have a championship and that's all the evidence you need. I can't stand Ryan Day but he has the best program in America.

So then the arguments are for 4-8. While I think Freeman is the best of this group it does put a lot of pressure on this ND team. With a coach like this each season we don't win builds more and more pressure.

I am glad we have the "4th" best coach in CFB, it means multiple playoff wins are REQUIRED the next couple years, and maybe even a championship ...

thomasna: A championship is needed just to stay "4th" best. The defense is loaded. The coaching staff is top notch although Ash has to prove his defense is elite against top teams. The OL and QB should be very good. I am waiting to see how the skill position talent on offense plays before saying Notre Dame is THE team in 2026-27. Losing the home run speed at RB and breaking in two new receivers who haven't played much is projecting a lot, IMO. I'd give Oregon the best title odds right now followed by ND and then Ohio State.

IrishLenny76: When he wins the national championship he'll move up.

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ESPN ranked Notre Dame's Marcus Freeman as the No. 4 coach in college football heading into the 2026 season.

PHOTO BY CHAD WEAVER

Bigteve79: Having Marcus Freeman at 4th is fair at this stage of his career. When he wins a national title at ND, he'll go up a couple notches and potentially be #1 with multiple titles if he stays for 5-10 years. With the way the program is recruiting right now, there are very few weak spots on the roster and the assembled group of assistant coaches and support staff rival the best in the sport. The man is a leader who is respected highly by the rest of the coaching fraternity and a guy most high school recruits would likely enjoy playing for because they relate to him in a way they never could with Brian Kelly.

THE GOLD STANDARD

THE BEST OF NOTRE DAME FOOTBALL
1976 – 2025

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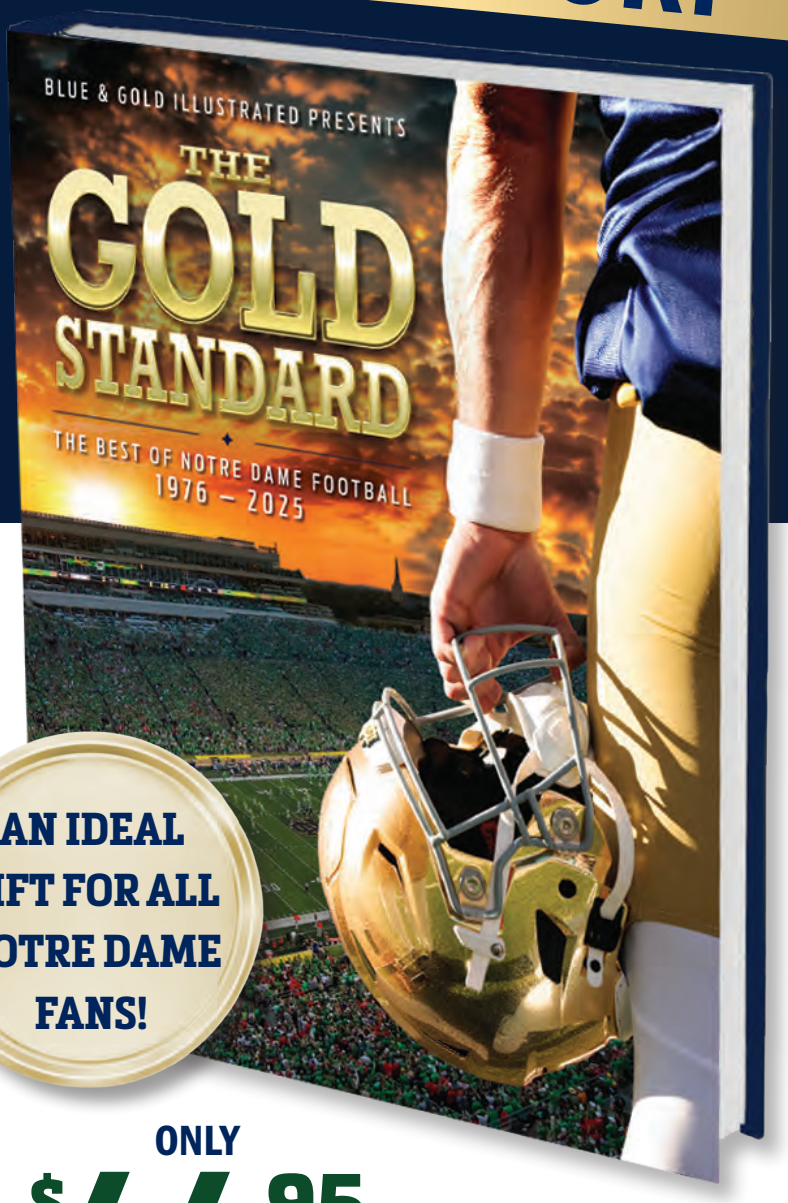

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THE BIG PICTURE

'THE FABRIC OF FOOTBALL'

The century-long link between the Notre Dame Fighting Irish and Green Bay Packers was honored in Notre Dame's latest Shamrock Series uniforms. The new Irish uniform, created in conjunction with Under Armour, was announced exactly 60 days prior to Notre Dame's matchup with Wisconsin Sept. 6 at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis.

"For a century, our stories have been stitched together," Irish head coach Marcus Freeman said in a social media video releasing the new look. "From the Golden Boy, Paul Hornung, winning titles in both colors to the Notre Dame box formation that defined the early days of Green Bay, we are the outliers. The small town legends. The independent spirits who believe tradition isn't just something you just remember. It's something you wear.

"This year, the Shamrock Series comes to the most hallowed ground in the professional game. A tribute to the pioneers. A nod to the Acme Packers' blue and gold roots, fused with the fire of the Fighting Irish. Two legacies. One field. Woven from the same cloth. Bound by history. On Sept. 6, the tradition returns to its source. Notre Dame. Lambeau. This is the fabric of football."

— Steve Downey

PHOTOS COURTESY NOTRE DAME

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A TRIBUTE TO THE DEEP BLUES WORN BY THE HISTORIC 1920s ACME PACKERS

88
9
47

BY ERIC HANSEN

Freeman, who was hired to be Notre Dame's defensive coordinator by Brian Kelly in January 2021, said he would welcome a visit and honest feedback from the former Irish coach. "I hope that he'll be willing to do that, because it can make us better," Freeman noted.

PHOTO BY CHAD WEAVER

CREATING THAT EDGE

The essence of Notre Dame's Marcus Freeman and why his coaching stock continues to rise

In late July, Marcus Freeman encapsulated the secret sauce to his continual rise into the upper stratosphere of college football coaching.

And he did so with both a facial expression and the avoidance of a word salad, in the sentences that followed.

The subject matter covered in the question — one of roughly 30 the fifth-year Notre Dame head coach fielded in a 45-minute sit-down with a small group of reporters — had to do with his predecessor, Brian Kelly, whose summer image-rehab tour includes pushing the notion of an August visit to see Freeman and the Irish football program that he walked away from in late November 2021.

After putting his hand over his face and then sitting slack-jawed for a couple of seconds — seemingly telling in its own right — Freeman did what Freeman does. Spin the possibly awkward experience into an opportunity to grow himself and the program.

"When you talk about his years of experience as a coach," Freeman said of the man who hired him as defensive coordinator in January 2021, "I'm sure he could come here and evaluate and give me feedback from things that he saw.

"I know he's talking about coming to practice. We text back and forth, and he wants to come around. If he does, then I'll tell him, 'Hey, I want you to evaluate. I want you to give me some honest feedback.'

"Because there's very few people that will give you honest feedback, and I hope that he'll be willing to do that, because it can make us better."

THE ESSENCE OF MARCUS FREEMAN

It's not just consistent messaging. It's who Marcus Freeman continues to be. And that is the notion that you never arrive. You're always learning.

That serves Freeman well, because while value systems tend to be immutable, the world around those values in college football is constantly evolving. That's why Freeman's reactions to those changes make sense, because it's not about being well rehearsed, it's about being authentic.

What that's produced on the field in the 40-year-old Freeman's first four years since succeeding Kelly in December 2021 is a 43-12 mark. The Irish will aim to add to the win total beginning Sept. 6 against Wisconsin in Green Bay, Wis., with a roster that looks eerily similar to those concocted in the peak Lou Holtz years.

Kelly, meanwhile, in his three seasons at LSU and a truncated fourth before being fired, three days after his 64th birthday, was 34-14.

WHAT KELLY COULD LEARN

There's not much of an appetite for Brian Kelly content among the Irish fan base these days, and understandably so. His messy exit in 2021 and the self-narrative that came with it hasn't gotten any better with Kelly's recent attempts to reframe it instead of owning it.

And if Kelly is going to reboot his coaching career in 2027 after a year of TV work, that's going to have to be who he is to make it a success, much the way he did after a 4-8 season at Notre Dame in 2016.

It does no good to look in the mirror

if you're not willing to peek behind your blind spots.

And in that sense, maybe there's a learning opportunity for Kelly if/when he comes back to the Notre Dame campus next month.

Like how the Irish continue to handle their exclusion from last season's College Football Playoff with a 10-2 record and a 10-game winning streak.

"There's got to be a reason for this," Freeman said in the moment Dec. 7. "I don't have the answer right now. There's a reason. We're in the middle of it right now."

And what does that look like now as Notre Dame starts football training camp, on Aug. 6?

THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION

"We left doubt," Freeman said back in late July. "That's the answer. I wasn't ready to accept that at that moment. My natural reaction was to blame others, blame the committee. 'It's not fair.' But by the time I regrouped and met with the team, I said, 'We left doubt.'

"Now we can use it. Now we can evaluate everything we've done from January to August. We lost two games. If we didn't lose those two games, we're in the playoff. Instead of blaming not making the playoff on a committee, you put it on yourself.

"Because if we blame the committee, now we don't need to do anything different. We deserved to be in the playoff. Why am I going to reevaluate what we're doing?

> **"It's my job to find ways to create that edge, to create that motivation."**
>
> **FREEMAN**

"No, we left doubt. We lost two games. How do we fix that? So, you go evaluate everything you do from January to August and try to enhance it in certain areas to hopefully produce a better outcome when you play those two games."

It's not about having all the answers and digging in your heels. It's about having the courage to ask the right questions, even if it makes the coaches and players in the program uncomfortable. *Especially* if it makes the coaches and players in the program uncomfortable.

It's not just about spewing mantras. It's living them. And that's what Kelly will see in Freeman if the reunion indeed unfolds this month.

"It's my job to find ways to create that edge, to create that motivation," Freeman said last spring on a day after practice when everything otherwise felt like right turns and green lights. "And listen, if you were in every team meeting, the general theme would all be the same: How do you choose hard? Because you have to struggle.

"And how do you continue to sacrifice for someone or something other than yourself? Ultimately for us in the football program, it's Notre Dame. And that's got to be the edge, the challenge every day.

"We have to struggle. Nothing great is achieved without hard, tough struggles, right? Mentally or physically. But you have to sacrifice. Nothing great is achieved on your own. You have to be willing to sacrifice for someone or something other than yourself." ✦

IMPORTANT SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

THE 2026 SEASON IS KICKING OFF A LITTLE DIFFERENTLY.

Notre Dame opens the year on Sunday instead of the traditional Saturday, so your Wisconsin recap issue will go to press and into the mail on Labor Day. This means a shorter mailing window than usual. Holiday processing and postal delivery times may vary depending on your location. **Here's what you need to know:**

OPPONENT ON DECK: RICE

Get an early look at Notre Dame's Week 2 matchup against Rice. *See page 47 of this issue.*

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DRIVING FORCE
Quarterback CJ Carr is among Notre Dame's biggest and most important keys to success in 2026

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Point ✦ Counterpoint:
WHO WILL BE NOTRE DAME'S MVP IN THE SEASON OPENER?

All Eyes On CJ Carr At Lambeau Field — **By Tyler Horka**

Remember when Sam Hartman was nearly flawless in his Notre Dame debut? When he had as many incomplete passes as touchdown tosses against Navy in Ireland — 4 apiece? While it's not CJ Carr's first start with the Fighting Irish, I've got a hunch he's going to be just as dynamite for Notre Dame in a neutral-site matchup against Wisconsin as Hartman was three years ago against the Midshipmen.

CARR

Now, the two performances obviously have nothing to do with each other. But there is nothing wrong with remembering one recent outstanding outing for a high-profile Notre Dame quarterback and arriving at the idea another will emulate it.

The thing with Carr is, he's beyond talented enough to do so. This is not a world-beating Wisconsin defense, either. If Notre Dame's team mantra is "leave no doubt," then Carr, a trendy name in the Heisman Trophy conversation all offseason, might as well do exactly that from Week 1. It'll be a welcome sight for Irish fans to see that Carr wasn't a one-hit wonder or that he won't be prone to a second-year slump as the starter. You want a lot of players to have a Week 1 coming out party if you're Notre Dame, but who's more important to any team than QB1?

In many ways, Notre Dame will go as Carr goes in 2026. And the redshirt sophomore quarterback from Saline, Mich., — who started all 12 games for the Irish a year ago — is going to be pretty good from the start. It'll be a long day for the Badgers' defense.

Boubacar Traore Will Ruin Wisconsin Debuts — **By Tyler James**

Wisconsin entered its preseason camp with Old Dominion transfer Colton Joseph expected to be the team's starting quarterback and a pair of transfers — Lucas Simmons-Johansson (Florida State) and PJ Wilkins (Ole Miss) — battling for the starting left tackle job. The challenge of Notre Dame redshirt junior defensive end Boubacar Traore awaits both positions.

TRAORE

The 6-foot-5, 253-pound Traore led the Irish in sacks (6.5), tackles for loss (10) and quarterback hurries (8) last season. He's entering the 2026 season with expectations to make an even greater impact that could secure him a spot as a high pick in next year's NFL Draft. Traore can start to make his case as a game wrecker in 2026 in the season opener against Wisconsin.

Regardless whether Simmons-Johansson or Wilkins wins the starting left tackle job for Wisconsin, neither possesses much game experience in that role. Wilkins has made four career starts between Charlotte (two in 2024) and Ole Miss (two in 2025), but they all came at left guard. Simmons-Johansson played just 84 offensive snaps as a backup left tackle in his three seasons with the Seminoles.

Joseph, a two-year starter and 2025 Sun Belt Offensive Player of the Year, can't feel too comfortable about making his first start at Wisconsin with Traore on the other side of the line of scrimmage. Notre Dame should try to match Traore against Wisconsin's inexperienced left tackle in pass rush situations, but he can also be a force against the run. He'll be key in preventing Joseph, who rushed for 1,007 yards last season, from being a dangerous dual threat in the backfield.

Five Questions With ... SENIOR GUARD BRAEDEN SHREWSBERRY

The first three seasons of the Micah Shrewsberry era for Notre Dame men's basketball haven't been filled with a lot of highs. Shrewsberry owns a 41-56 record at Notre Dame after leading the Irish to three consecutive losing seasons.

His oldest son, Braeden Shrewsberry, has been a key player on all three of those Irish teams. Now the senior guard, who averaged 11.9 points per game the last three seasons, is pushing to be a leader in a program that sorely needs positive momentum. The Irish lost six players to the transfer portal in the offseason and replaced them with transfers from Gonzaga, Rutgers, Winthrop, Penn, Davidson and Division II UVA Wise.

Shrewsberry is a career 38.1 percent shooter from three-point range at Notre Dame, but he's working to find more ways to impact games for the Irish in the 2026-27 season. He sat down with *Blue & Gold Illustrated* in July while the team was going through summer practices. Here are some highlights from that one-on-one conversation.

Shrewsberry, a career 38.1 percent shooter from three-point range, is motivated for the Irish to excel after three losing seasons.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

***BGI*:** Does it feel surreal being a veteran on the team?

Shrewsberry: "It does. It's gone by so quick. People always say that, but it actually has really gone by quick."

***BGI*:** Does that add extra motivation to it? That this is putting a cap to your Notre Dame career?

Shrewsberry: "Yeah, definitely. I've been here for three years, and we haven't won s---. If we don't win, I'm going to look back at it when my career's over and have regrets and be down about that. I'm definitely all in."

***BGI*:** This team has so many veteran transfers coming in for their final seasons. Does it feel like you all have chips on your shoulders with something to prove?

Shrewsberry: "That's definitely something we've all talked about, all the older guys, and even when they were on their visits, just talking to them about how they're all in, they want to win this year, it's their last year. We all just have one goal, and that's to make the NCAA Tournament. It's good to have everybody on the same page and the same goals."

***BGI*:** What's going to be the key to making that improvement to get to that tournament level?

Shrewsberry: "Just getting better every day, honestly. We're going to have adversity. We're going to lose some games. Nobody goes undefeated. We've just got to be able to respond to adversity and keep that hunger, keep that chip on our shoulder, because that's what's going to get us through."

***BGI*:** What are you doing individually to try to take the next step with your game?

Shrewsberry: "Really just what I do every offseason. Just trying to expand my game, just keep getting better in my game overall. I'm getting stronger in the weight room. I feel like I've gotten a lot stronger this summer. As a team, too, we talk about that with our strength coach. Just being a killer."

— Tyler James

The Fighting Irish and Trojans agreed to a deal to play for four straight years, starting with a game at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in Week 1 of the 2030 season.

PHOTO BY CHAD WEAVER

Notre Dame-Southern Cal Renew Longtime Football Rivalry

The blamefest is over. The Notre Dame-Southern Cal football rivalry is back on. The two schools tweeted out that the longtime intersectional series will resume with a clash at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in Week 1 of 2030. The new contract calls for four games, home and home, from 2030-33.

Notre Dame will travel to Los Angeles to take on Southern Cal on Aug. 31, 2030, and the Trojans will pay a visit to Notre Dame Stadium on Aug. 30, 2031. The meetings in 2032 and 2033 will each be played in the first three weeks of the season.

And suddenly, a scheduled two-game series with Indiana — in 2030 and 2031 — has been erased from those future Irish schedules. The first game was to have taken place Aug. 31, 2030, at Notre Dame Stadium. The two teams would have then met again Sept. 27, 2031, with Indiana hosting in Bloomington, Ind. A source told *Blue & Gold Illustrated* that Indiana was the party who asked to cancel the ND-IU series. So now maybe that's the new online blame game?

If so, it replaces the months of social media snark and blame games that followed what was an indefinite pause in the on-field portion of the intersectional rivalry with Southern Cal, which would have celebrated its 100th anniversary in late November with a matchup in Los Angeles.

Instead, the Irish will close their 2026 regular season Thanksgiving Saturday in a dome in Syracuse, N.Y., against former Irish backup quarterback Steve Angeli and Syracuse. The Irish obliterated the Orange without an injured Angeli, 70-7, last November. Southern Cal that weekend will mosey down to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, Calif., to play Big Ten rival UCLA.

In May, the Los Angeles Times reported that talks had resumed in the fairly new cold war. Notre Dame sources, however, indicated they had never stopped. What both sides did agree upon was that the earliest the series could be resumed would be 2030.

It could be a result of the expectation that the College Football Playoff will eventually adopt a 24-team format, expanding from its current 12-team setup. Notre Dame athletics director Pete Bevacqua recently threw his weight behind the 24-team concept, which theoretically incentivizes Power Four teams to be more aggressive in their nonconference scheduling. Because there's more margin for error when it comes to inclusion in a larger field than the current 12-team format, a November loss might not hurt so bad, from Southern Cal's standpoint. Or playing the game early in the season might be more palatable to Notre Dame, from that lens, which is when all four games are scheduled.

The Irish have won seven of the last eight meetings in a series that started in 1926 and had been played every season since then except for 1943-45 (because of WWII) and 2020 (because of the COVID-19 pandemic). And that 1-7 record in recent years for the Trojans is why Notre Dame fans fairly ponder the main reason for Southern Cal finding a contractual trapdoor out. But the Trojans don't just have a Notre Dame problem. They have a jet-lag issue, or some travel-related reverse mojo when they cross the Rocky Mountains.

Southern Cal is just 2-13 in its last 15 trips into the Eastern or Central time zones, something that occurs far more frequently since leaving the Pac-12 for the Big Ten in 2024. That includes a 34-24 nonconference loss to the Irish in South Bend on Oct. 18, 2025. The Trojans have four such cross-country road trips in 2026, including a matchup against defending national champion Indiana in Bloomington, Ind. The Trojans have never made the CFP in either its four-team format (2014-23) or its 12-team iteration (2024-25). The Irish qualified for the four-team party in 2018 and 2020, and for the first 12-team playoff in 2024.

In the Notre Dame-Southern Cal series, the Irish hold a 53-38-5 edge, including 3-1 in the coach Marcus Freeman years.

— Eric Hansen

NOTRE DAME PARTNERS WITH SOFI IN JERSEY PATCH DEAL

Notre Dame uniforms will be adding a new logo starting this fall. The university and SoFi Technologies announced July 28 a multi-year deal that makes SoFi the official financial services partner of Notre Dame athletics.

The partnership will be reflected with a SoFi jersey patch on all Notre Dame uniforms. As a result, the school will establish an annual fund to "further Notre Dame's '4 for Forever' promise," per a release from the athletics department. That fund will "support all Notre Dame student-athletes through scholarships, financial education, career development and exclusive opportunities."

Earlier this year, the NCAA voted in favor of allowing Division I athletic programs starting Aug. 1 to place up to two patches, in addition to uniform manufacturer logos, of no more than 4 square inches on uniforms for regular-season games. High-profile athletic programs, such as Notre Dame, LSU and Ohio State, have started to reveal their jersey patch partnerships.

Earlier July 28, Ohio State announced its partnership with JPMorgan Chase. ESPN's Pete Thamel reported Ohio State's deal was expected to yield $17 million per year for the Buckeyes. Ross Dellenger of Yahoo Sports first reported Notre Dame's deal with SoFi is for six years and is worth an average of $18-20 million annually. On3's Pete Nakos later confirmed those figures.

The Notre Dame-SoFi partnership will also introduce the SoFi Champions Scholarship, which Notre Dame described as "a comprehensive scholarship program dedicated to walk-on student-athletes, annually recognizing one men's and one women's student-athlete who exemplify ambition, resilience, leadership and service." Each recipient of the SoFi Champions Scholarship will receive a one-year full tuition scholarship.

Notre Dame and SoFi will also create a "student-athlete services hub," which will give access to financial education, planning tools and personalized guidance and products to student-athletes.

"Our '4 for Forever' promise at Notre Dame is paramount to providing the best student-athlete experience in the country," Irish athletics director Pete Bevacqua said in the release. "SoFi shares in this commitment to developing strong, ambitious leaders who are set up for success at Notre Dame and beyond. Together, our relationship will create lasting value for our student-athletes and their families for generations to come."

— Tyler James

Notre Dame signed a six-year deal worth an average of $18 million to $20 million per year with SoFi Technologies, which is believed to be the richest in college athletics history.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

4

Notre Dame players made the PFF College 50 list of the top overall players in college football for the 2026 season: junior cornerback **LEONARD MOORE** at No. 2, redshirt sophomore quarterback CJ Carr at No. 14, junior linebacker Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa at No. 16 and safety Brauntae Johnson at No. 44.

Only Oregon (six) and Texas (five) had more players on the list than the Fighting Irish. Notre Dame, though, was the only school to place three players among the top 20.

Moore and Viliamu-Asa were the top players at cornerback and linebacker, respectively, while Johnson was No. 4 at safety and Carr was No. 5 among signal-callers. Four other Irish players were listed among the top returning players at their respective positions: senior Drayk Bowen at No. 6 among linebackers, junior Francis Brewu at No. 7 among defensive linemen, junior Anthonie Knapp at No. 10 among offensive tackles and redshirt junior Boubacar Traore as honorable mention on the edge list.

6

Football programs set up to dominate the back half of the decade, per CBS Sports, are: Ohio State, Georgia, Notre Dame, Texas, Oregon and Indiana.

"The Irish are among the 10 biggest spenders in the sport," Chris Hummer of CBS Sports noted. "They offer arguably the best combination of a high floor — thanks to the schedule and annual top-10 recruiting classes — and a high ceiling in college football heading into the second half of the decade."

1st

Is where Notre Dame was ranked in ESPN's annual future power rankings, which project a football program's potential for success for the next two seasons (in this case 2026 and 2027), up from No. 5 a year ago.

Teams are evaluated by quarterback situation, offensive line/defensive line outlook, roster management, star power (All-Americans, national award contenders, all-conference contenders) and coaching staff.

NUMBERS AND QUOTES

BY STEVE DOWNEY

4th

Is where both CBS Sports and ESPN ranked Notre Dame's Marcus Freeman among the top coaches for the 2026 season, the same spot he was in last season. Indiana's Curt Cignetti (No. 1), Georgia's Kirby Smart (No. 2) and Ohio State's Ryan Day (No. 3) were ranked ahead of Freeman in the same spot in both listings.

No. 1

Defensive player in the country heading into 2026 is Notre Dame junior cornerback Leonard Moore in the eyes of more than 20 front office staff members across the sport, including general managers, player personnel directors and scouting directors in a poll conducted by ESPN.

"Nobody gives him fits," one Power Four director of player personnel (DPP) told ESPN. "That's hard to really say about any other defensive player. Leonard Moore doesn't struggle with anybody. You can put him on anybody in the country. … He's the ultimate shutdown guy."

"That kid takes away half the field," a former SEC staffer said.

"The biggest thing is he can make an offense have to adjust to Plan B," another DPP told ESPN. "They took away [Southern Cal wide receiver] Makai Lemon last year, and it's part of the reason they won the game. They put the best player in the country on him. He's just so naturally gifted that it was easy for him. … He can stop anybody you throw at him."

"Moore's first two seasons have been better than those of any cornerback in the PFF College era. According to PFF's wins above average metric, he ranked as the third-most valuable cornerback in the nation as a true freshman in 2024, trailing only 2025 first-round picks Travis Hunter and Jahdae Barron. Moore earned a nation-leading 91.8 PFF grade as a sophomore and was PFF's pick for the Jim Thorpe Award as college football's top defensive back. He has recorded 7 career interceptions and projects as one of the best cornerback prospects in recent memory."

— Max Chadwick of PFF on Notre Dame junior Leonard Moore being the top cornerback and No. 2 overall player in college football heading into the 2026 season

$2.1 Billion

Projected program valuation for Notre Dame football by The Athletic. That ranked third behind No. 1 Texas at $2.46 billion and No. 2 Ohio State at $2.3 billion. The Athletic used actual transactions in professional leagues to compare a team's sale price with its average revenue, using financial numbers reported by the schools themselves while also considering factors such as brand power, demographics and conference realignment to settle on their valuation.

"In the 2024-25 fiscal year, Notre Dame reported more football revenue (almost $196 million) to the U.S. Department of Education than anyone else," The Athletic noted. "Its recent average, however, still trailed Texas by $27 million, and the Irish have shown more volatility as a program than Ohio State. Our number puts Notre Dame football on par with the valuation of the average NHL team (according to Sportico)."

NCAA FBS PROGRAM VALUATION PROJECTIONS

Rk.	Team	2025 value	2026 value
1.	Texas	$2.38 billion	$2.46 billion
2.	Ohio State	$1.9 billion	$2.3 billion
3.	***Notre Dame***	***$1.85 billion***	***$2.1 billion***
4.	Michigan	$1.83 billion	$2 billion
5.	Georgia	$1.92 billion	$1.95 billion
6.	Alabama	$1.74 billion	$1.8 billion
7.	Oklahoma	$1.49 billion	$1.6 billion
	Southern Cal	$1.40 billion	$1.6 billion
9.	Tennessee	$1.37 billion	$1.57 billion
10.	Penn State	$1.2 billion	$1.4 billion

3rd Was where CBS Sports ranked Notre Dame's secondary among the best position groups in college football for the 2026 season. Ohio State's receiving corps and Oregon's defensive line were Nos. 1 and 2, respectively.

CBS Sports also tabbed the Fighting Irish's front seven (defensive linemen and linebackers) the fifth-best in college football and their offensive line as the sixth-best.

CBS Sports' Top Position Groups For 2026

1. Ohio State wide receiving corps
2. Oregon defensive line
3. ***Notre Dame secondary***
4. Texas wide receiving corps
5. Indiana offensive line
6. Ole Miss backfield (QB and RB)
7. Georgia linebackers
8. Miami backfield (QB and RB)
9. Texas offensive line
10. Alabama secondary

3-5

Record (.375 winning percentage) for Marcus Freeman in Games 1 and 2 during his first four seasons as Notre Dame's head coach. The Irish have wins over Navy (5-7 final record that season), Tennessee State (6-5) and Texas A&M (8-5), plus losses to Ohio State (11-2), Marshall (9-4), Northern Illinois (8-5), Miami (13-3) and Texas A&M (11-2). The three wins came against teams that finished with a combined record of 19-17 (.527), while the losses came against five squads that produced a combined mark of 52-16 (.765).

In the rest of Freeman's time in charge since the start of the 2022 campaign, the Fighting Irish are 40-6 for an .870 winning percentage.

5 Notre Dame players made On3's list of the top 100 college football players for the 2026 season: junior cornerback Leonard Moore at No. 3, offensive lineman Anthonie Knapp at No. 23, defensive end Boubacar Traore at No. 39, linebacker **KYNGSTONN VILIAMU-ASA** at No. 72 and quarterback CJ Carr at No. 85.

Indiana and Oregon led the way with eight players each on the list. Texas, Georgia and Texas Tech were next with six apiece, followed by Notre Dame, Miami and LSU with five each, and Oklahoma and Ohio State with four apiece.

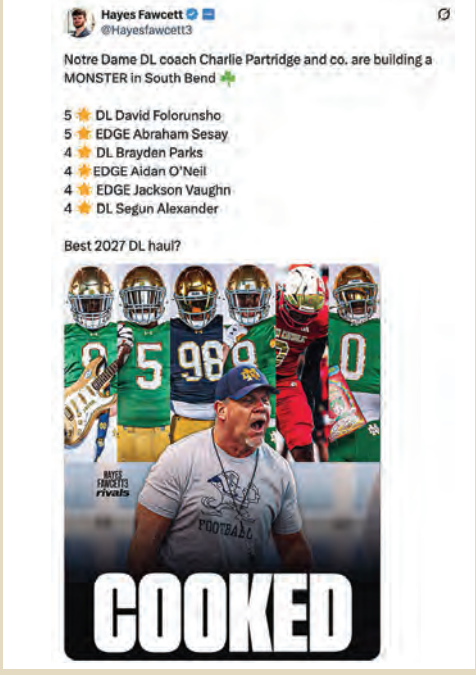
"You need to go back more than 30 years to the Lou Holtz era for the last time Notre Dame produced 10 draft picks in a single class. There is at least a decent chance the Irish could reach that mark in 2027. The Irish secondary might be the best in all of college football. Leonard Moore should finish with one of the highest grades I've ever given a cornerback – he is a slam-dunk top-10 pick. Tae Johnson looks like an early-round safety, and defensive backs DJ McKinney, Christian Gray and Luke Talich are also NFL-level players.

"Among the Irish seniors, wide receiver Jordan Faison and linebackers Drayk Bowen and Jaylen Sneed have preliminary draftable grades from NFL teams. I haven't scouted all of Notre Dame's underclassmen yet, but QB CJ Carr will be a draft pick whenever he jumps to the NFL. Edge rushers Boubacar Traore and Bryce Young have the talent to announce themselves as top-50 prospects this season. And junior linebacker Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa is an exciting player who should only continue to rise throughout the process.

"This program will be well-represented in the NFL Draft over the next few years."

– The Athletic NFL Draft analyst Dane Brugler

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER


Hayes Fawcett
@Hayesfawcett3
Notre Dame DL coach Charlie Partridge and co. are building a MONSTER in South Bend
5 DL David Folorunsho
5 EDGE Abraham Sesay
4 DL Brayden Parks
4 EDGE Aidan O'Neil
4 EDGE Jackson Vaughn
4 DL Segun Alexander
Best 2027 DL haul?
COOKED

Irish On Social Media

NCAA March Madness
@MarchMadnessWBB
Well-represented, @ndwbb
#NCAAWBB #WNBAAllStar
FOUR ALL-STARS
NOTRE DAME HAS FOUR FORMER PLAYERS IN THE 2026 WNBA ALL-STAR GAME, MORE THAN ANY OTHER SCHOOL

CHARTING THE IRISH

THE USUAL SUSPECTS ... AND NOTRE DAME

Heading into the 2026 season, ESPN's Football Power Index algorithm is headed by the usual suspects. Ohio State, Texas, Oregon, Georgia. Can't forget about reigning national champion Indiana.

Or Notre Dame.

It's the Buckeyes at No. 1 and Longhorns at No. 2, as far as the FPI top two goes, and it's the Fighting Irish at No. 3.

The FPI, according to ESPN's website, "is a measure of team strength that is meant to be the best predictor of a team's performance going forward for the rest of the season." The calculation comes out to a number that indicates how many points above or below average a team is. Ohio State has the highest preseason score with a mark of 28.7. Texas is next at 26.9. Notre Dame checks in at No. 3 with a figure of 25.9.

The FPI is about more than just those numbers, however. It also projects a win-loss total down to a tenth of a victory. The Irish are predicted to win 10.7 games. The only team in the country with a higher predicted win total is Texas Tech at 10.8.

It's the Irish, though, that have the best chance of winning every single one of their regular-season games. The FPI has that percentage sitting at 32.7. Texas Tech is second at 25.2.

As for qualifying for the national championship and winning the whole thing, Notre Dame has a 74.1 percent chance of doing the former and a 10.6 percent chance of achieving the latter. Those chances rank second and third, respectively, per the FPI. Ohio State is ahead of Notre Dame in the playoff percentage category, and Ohio State and Texas are the two teams with a better shot of earning the national title than the Irish.

— Tyler Horka

ESPN'S 2026 PRESEASON FOOTBALL POWER INDEX RANKINGS

Rk.	Team	FPI
1.	Ohio State	28.7
2.	Texas	26.9
3.	***Notre Dame***	***25.9***
4.	Oregon	25.3
5.	Georgia	24.8
6.	Indiana	23.1
7.	Miami	21.8
8.	Alabama	20.1
9.	LSU	20.0
10.	Texas Tech	20.0

✦ GIMME FIVE

The Shamrock Series has been good to Notre Dame.

The Fighting Irish are a perfect 12-0 in the neutral-site matchup series that is unique to their program and brand and has been played in more years than not since its inception in 2009.

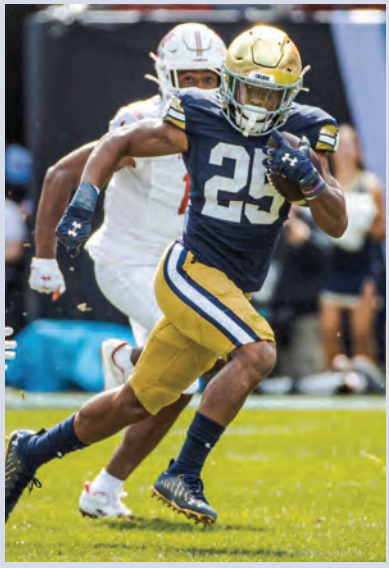
This year's game against Wisconsin at Lambeau Field will signify the fifth different venue and fourth different opponent Notre Dame has faced in the Shamrock Series since 2016. In the five previous Shamrock Series games prior to this one, Notre Dame was a winner by at least four touchdowns in all but one. The only game that was close was a 28-20 win against BYU in Las Vegas in Marcus Freeman's first season as head coach.

The game against the Cougars was a rare instance of the Irish being just a slight favorite in a Shamrock Series game. Usually they're a big favorite.

According to OddsShark, the Irish were favored to beat BYU by 3.5 points. The other four point spreads in Notre Dame's last handful of Shamrock Series games were ND -14.5, ND-14.0, ND -10.0 and ND -6.0. For what it's worth, Notre Dame was a whopping 20.5-point favorite over Wisconsin, as of late July, in this year's season opener.

Obviously, the Irish scheduled the Badgers for the Shamrock Series game with the thought they'd give them a good test in a marquee matchup. And maybe they still will. It's just that Shamrock Series history suggests they will not.

— Tyler Horka



The last time Notre Dame faced Wisconsin prior to 2026, the Fighting Irish beat the Badgers 41-13 at Soldier Field in Cicago on Sept. 25, 2021.

PHOTO COURTESY NOTRE DAME ATHLETICS

NOTRE DAME'S LAST FIVE SHAMROCK SERIES RESULTS

Date	Location	Opponent	Result
Nov. 12, 2016	Alamodome	Army	W, 44-6
Nov. 17, 2018	Yankee Stadium	Syracuse	W, 36-3
Sept. 25, 2021	Soldier Field	Wisconsin	W, 41-13
Oct. 8, 2022	Allegiant Stadium	BYU	W, 28-20
Oct. 5, 2024	Yankee Stadium	Army	W, 49-14

TOP OF THE CLASS

Irish student-athletes excelling on the field and in the classroom

Amaya Aramini — Track & Field

The rising junior from Reno, Nev., earned honorable mention All-America honors at the 2026 NCAA Outdoor Championships June 10-13 in Eugene, Ore., with a 17th-place finish in the 10,000-meter race.

Aramini punched her ticket to the national championship meet after finishing sixth with a time of 32:54.71 in the event at the NCAA Regional May 27-30 in Lexington, Ky.

Jacob Modleski — Golf

Following a strong 17th-place performance at the ACC Championships in April, and after leading the Irish to a ninth-place finish at the NCAA Regional in May, the rising senior from Noblesville, Ind., was named to the All-ACC Team June 15.

Modleski competed in all 12 tournaments for Notre Dame during the 2025-26 season and led the Irish with eight top-10 finishes. He also earned a spot on Team USA in the 2026 Arnold Palmer Cup in June.

Obiora Okeke — Track & Field

The Irish graduate student from Hawthorne, Calif., earned honorable mention All-America honors with an 18th-place finish in the shot put at the 2026 NCAA Outdoor Championships June 10-13 in Eugene, Ore.

Okeke secured a spot in the national championship meet after finishing fourth in the shot put with a throw of 19.32 meters at the NCAA Regional May 27-30 in Lexington, Ky.

Isabella Sangha — Basketball

Shortly before arriving to Notre Dame for summer workouts, the incoming Irish freshman from Toronto competed for Canada and won a silver medal at the 2026 FIBA U18 Women's AmeriCup in Irapuato, Mexico.

In four appearances with Team Canada, Sangha averaged 3.8 points and 3.5 rebounds in 10.6 minutes per game. The 6-foot-3 forward will also play volleyball for Notre Dame this fall.

— Todd D. Burlage

Anniversaries In Notre Dame Football History: Aug. 30-Sept. 5

55 Years Ago: Sept. 4, 1971

Sports Illustrated's preseason college football preview listed Notre Dame at No. 1, despite the graduation of Heisman Trophy runner-up quarterback Joe Theismann.

The reason was that 16 of 22 starters on offense and defense returned — led by an impregnable front four with Walt Patulski, Mike Kadish, Greg Marx and Fred Swendsen — from the previous year's 10-1 team that finished No. 2 after ending Texas' 30-game winning streak in the Cotton Bowl. At quarterback, head coach Ara Parseghian had four candidates: senior Bill Etter, juniors Pat Steenberge and Jim Bulger, and sophomore Cliff Brown.

"There is no need to choose until the Friday night before the first game," Parseghian said. "There's no problem having two quarterbacks work with the first unit."

50 Years Ago: Sept. 1, 1976

Ten days prior to the season opener against No. 9 Pitt, junior backup quarterback Joe Montana — who helped rally Notre Dame to three comeback victories off the bench in 1975 — separated his right shoulder during practice, which would sideline him all year.

The injury occurred against the No. 1 defense when Montana turned back to avoid a hard-charging Ross Browner, but he was then crushed from the blind side by the other end, Willie Fry.

"I feel bad for Joe," second-year Irish head coach Dan Devine said. "He was just starting to come along."

20 Years Ago: Sept. 5, 1996

In its most recent Thursday night regular-season game, No. 6 Notre Dame overcame 7 fumbles (4 lost) to post a 14-7 win at Vanderbilt. The Commodores amassed only 126 yards of total offense, but 59 came on a touchdown pass with 11:16 left to take a 7-6 lead.

The Irish responded with a 75-yard march that took 14 plays and was capped by a 3-yard touchdown run by fullback Marc Edwards. Quarterback Ron Powlus completed all 5 passes for 61 yards, most notably an 18-yard connection to Malcolm Johnson on third-and-14 from his 42-yard line.

10 Years Ago: Sept. 3, 2011

In maybe the most surreal game ever at Notre Dame Stadium, first-time opponent South Florida — coached by Skip Holtz, son of Notre Dame icon Lou Holtz — emerged with a stunning 23-20 victory.

The game lasted a record 5 hours and 59 minutes because Notre Dame Stadium was evacuated twice due to storms and lightning. The Irish committed 5 turnovers to USF's 0, and on four occasions Notre Dame failed to score from the red zone — three of them inside the Bulls' 10-yard line (and two inside the 5). The first was on the opening series when a fumble by senior running back Jonas Gray was returned for a 96-yard touchdown to help propel USF to a 16-0 halftime lead.

"Today was probably the strangest game anybody has ever been a part of," said Notre Dame quarterback Tommy Rees, who replaced starter Dayne Crist in the second half and completed 24 of 34 passes for 296 yards with 2 scores.

10 Years Ago: Sept. 4, 2016

Notre Dame rallied from a 31-14 deficit in the third quarter, scoring touchdowns on three of their next four possessions to take a 35-31 lead at Texas. However, what would've been the largest comeback victory in more than 30 years for the Irish wasn't to be. The Longhorns rebounded for a 50-47 double-overtime triumph in front of a Texas-record crowd of 102,315.

The 47 points were the most ever by a Fighting Irish football team in defeat. The previous high occurred in a 46-44 three-overtime loss to Navy on Nov. 3, 2007.

Five Years Ago: Sept. 5, 2021

In his Fighting Irish debut, quarterback Jack Coan completed 26 of 35 passes for 366 yards with 4 touchdowns and an interception he threw on a Hail Mary to lead No. 9 Notre Dame to a 41-38 overtime victory at Florida State.

It marked the first overtime road win for Notre Dame in program history. The Irish had been 0-3 in such games, falling 27-20 at Southern Cal on Nov. 30, 1996, 34-31 at Michigan State on Sept. 18, 2010, and 50-47 at Texas in double overtime on Sept. 4, 2016.

Coan's 366 passing yards were the most ever in a season opener for a Notre Dame quarterback, surpassing the previous high set by Irish offensive coordinator Tommy Rees (346) in 2013. Coan tied the school record for touchdown passes (4) in a season opener, joining Jimmy Clausen (2009) and Ron Powlus (1994). Coan also became the first Irish quarterback to eclipse 300 passing yards with 4 touchdowns since Clausen in 2009.

Irish quarterback DeShone Kizer accounted for 292 yards of total offense and 6 touchdowns in a 50-47 double-overtime loss at Texas in 2016. The 47 points are the most ever scored by Notre Dame in a defeat.

PHOTO BY BILL PANZICA

BY ERIC HANSEN

During fall camp, the Irish need to sort out two contested positions on their offensive line — right guard and center — while also building depth that can absorb an injury or two.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

SETTING THE AGENDA

The offensive line remains front and center in coordinator Mike Denbrock's continuing development of the offense

The offensive pieces Mike Denbrock inherited ahead of the 2024 Notre Dame football season were good enough to get to the doorstep of a national championship, yet also flawed enough to confirm his long-term vision for how he wanted to evolve it in future seasons.

In Year 3 of Denbrock's run as Irish offensive coordinator in the Marcus Freeman era — in his third tour of duty overall as a Notre Dame assistant — that vision is no longer just a concept. It's merging with reality as far as Denbrock is concerned.

A key offseason objective that Freeman and Denbrock share is to make sure that process looks more like a finished product and less like a work-in-progress when the Irish open the season Sept. 6 at iconic Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis., against Wisconsin.

The Badgers struggled enough under head coach Luke Fickell overall (4-8) in his third year at Wisconsin that his job security was teetering in November. But the Badger defense was actually more of a solution than part of the problem, ranking 24th nationally in total defense.

Based on the 2025 numbers, that would make Wisconsin the second-best defense Denbrock and the Irish will face in 2026, with Miami — 12th overall nationally — being the best.

"The focus has to be how do we become a better program at the start of the season, right?" Freeman told a small group of reporters in a late-July sit-down. That urgency comes from Freeman's combined 3-5 record in Games 1 and 2 during his first four seasons as Irish head coach and a combined 40-6 mark in the games that followed (with a bowl loss in his debut in 2021).

"I think as you look at over the four years, we've improved as a team as the season goes on," Freeman said. "And so there's something that we're doing in our process that is helping us improve and play better at the end of the season.

"How do we evaluate, through practice scripts and through what we're doing through science, to make that better? But also how do we fix the way we start? So, I think it's a fine line. We don't want to blow it up. We're doing something that's right. But how do we find a way to still get, there's a way to get better? We've just got to find it."

Changes along those lines were implemented during winter conditioning as well as the 15 spring practices staged in March and April, the latter of which included more ones-versus-ones and a larger volume of competitive team practice periods and fewer individual drills.

From a totality standpoint, Notre Dame did improve dramatically offensively in Denbrock's second year, and with a first-year starter at quarterback in CJ Carr. The Irish in fact, improved their national ranking in eight of the nine major offensive categories from 2024 to 2025.

In Denbrock's first year, quarterback Riley Leonard's running ability, his guile and his passing improvement over the course of that season paired well enough with Al Golden's elite defense to get the Irish into the CFP title game against Ohio State. But the Buckeyes, in their 34-23 victory, were able to expose the schematic soft spots in the offense and often were able to get the Irish to play left-handed and outside of a comfort zone.

To wit, that Notre Dame offense was extremely imbalanced (19th nationally in rush offense to 101st in pass offense), was a middling 45th in sacks allowed even with a mobile quarterback, and ranked 61st in third-down efficiency. Its No. 49 ranking nationally in team pass efficiency is the second worst of the 56

teams to reach the championship games in the BCS and Playoff eras.

The worst? The 2012 Irish, who checked in at 74th, and got clobbered by Alabama.

The Irish last season ranked fourth in that critical metric in which the last seven national champs have finished in the top eight in the country.

The next step this season, when the Irish will face just four teams that finished in the top 60 in total defense from last season, is an offensive team that can constantly and consistently counterpunch whatever an opposing defensive coordinator throws at it.

That can be by formation, by personnel groups and by tempo. That can be having all the gears and modes in the offensive inventory to run 15 times in a row if that best exploits a defense, or throw 15 times in a row — and everything in between.

At this stage it's more about refinements and repetitions, with minor tweaks, than wholesale problem-solving and reboots. Here then are the top five offensive objectives of training camp, which kicked off on Aug. 6:

1. Making A Statement With The Offensive Line

That means three things:

A) The continued evolution from an O-line that excelled in finesse run blocking and effective pass blocking in 2025 to one that can do all that *and* add a consistent physicality of being able to move teams off the ball — something that was spotty last season.

B) Completing the two dangling position battles, then building chemistry with your best five linemen. Those two contested positions are at right guard and center.

At right guard, Notre Dame's third-best tackle, redshirt freshman Matty Augustine, could end up being the team's second-best interior player, behind only junior left guard and All-America candidate Anthonie Knapp. Augustine would have to beat out redshirt junior Sullivan Absher, who made five starts late last season at left guard in place of injured starter Billy Schrauth, now an NFL rookie.

If Charles Jagusah does get medically cleared to play in 2026, it won't likely be by Sept. 6, and his return to play from a broken left humerus will likely be gradual.

The other battle is at center. Redshirt senior Ashton Craig has started the season as the No. 1 option in both 2024 and 2025, but he hasn't made it past the midpoint of either season, suffering torn ACLs both years.

His rehab timeline is on schedule, but two elements make this a battle — all the time Craig has missed the past *two* seasons and how well he'll be able to move after two major knee surgeries. The other is the strong offseason surge by Joe Otting, a redshirt junior who started the final six games of 2025 and made as much improvement as any Irish offensive lineman this summer, per sources.

C) Continuing to build depth that can absorb an injury or two, if that comes to pass. Even discounting what Jagusah could bring, the Irish have some strong options. The runners-up in the Augustine/Absher and Craig/Otting battles are the best of the interior options.

At tackle it could be Styles Prescod, freshman prodigy Grayson McKeogh or most likely putting Augustine at a tackle position and reinserting Absher at guard should he lose the right guard battle initially.

"Rudy gets those guys to truly believe in one," Freeman said of Irish offensive line coach Joe Rudolph. "And whoever's on the field represents us all. And how do we just continue to focus on getting

BGI PRE-FALL CAMP NOTRE DAME SCHOLARSHIP DEPTH CHART

Here is *Blue & Gold Illustrated's* projection for Notre Dame's 2026 scholarship depth chart on offense heading into fall camp Aug. 6.

OFFENSE

Quarterback

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
13	CJ Carr	6-2	215	R-So./3
12	Blake Hebert	6-2	216	R-Fr./4
or 10	Noah Grubbs	6-4	209	Fr./4
9	Teddy Jarrard	6-4	207	Fr./4

Running Back

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
22	Aneyas Williams	5-10	210	Jr./2
2	Nolan James Jr.	5-10	212	R-Fr./4
or 21	Kedren Young	5-11	234	R-So./3
or 26	Javian Osbourne	5-9	200	Fr./4
or 20	Jonaz Walton	5-9	214	Fr./4

Boundary Receiver

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
0	Quincy Porter	6-4	207	So./3
14	Micah Gilbert	6-2	205	R-So./3
5	Cam Williams	6-2	201	R-So./3
8	Jerome Bettis Jr.	6-2	199	R-Fr./4
11	Devin Fitzgerald	6-2	208	Fr./4

Field Receiver

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
6	Jordan Faison	5-11	185	Sr./1
17	Elijah Burress	6-1	190	R-Fr./4
19	Logan Saldate	5-11	185	R-So./3
16	Dylan Faison	6-2	163	Fr./4

Slot Receiver

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
3	Mylan Graham	6-1	192	R-So./3
or 1	Jaden Greathouse	6-1	215	R-Jr./2
4	Bubba Frazier	5-10	182	Fr./4
33	Matt Jeffery	5-11	195	R-So./3
18	Kaydon Finley	6-1	207	Fr./4
15	Brayden Robinson	5-7	168	Fr./4

Tight End

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
87	Cooper Flanagan	6-6	250	R-Jr./2
or 88	James Flanigan	6-6	251	R-Fr./4
or 7	Ty Washington	6-4	253	R-Sr./1
85	Jack Larsen	6-3	248	R-So./3
24	Ian Premer	6-6	240	Fr./4
84	Preston Fryzel	6-4	225	Fr./4

Left Tackle

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
74	Will Black	6-7	316	R-Fr./4
71	Styles Prescod	6-6	298	R-So./3
65	Grayson McKeogh	6-7	298	Fr./4

Left Guard

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
54	Anthonie Knapp	6-5	304	Jr./2
55	Chris Terek	6-5	321	R-Jr./2
77	Peter Jones	6-5	315	R-So./3
66	Tyler Merrill	6-6	330	Fr./4
51	Ben Nichols	6-5	320	Fr./4
67	Gregory Patrick	6-6	281	Fr./4

Center

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
70	Ashton Craig	6-5	310	R-Sr./1
64	Joe Otting	6-4	305	R-Jr./2
57	Cam Herron	6-2	291	R-Fr./4
50	Sullivan Garvin	6-5	315	Fr./4

Right Guard

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
75	Sullivan Absher	6-7	320	R-Jr./2
52	Devan Houstan	6-4	305	R-Jr./2
68	Charlie Thom	6-7	280	Fr./4
56	Charles Jagusah	6-5	330	R-Jr./2

Right Tackle

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
76	Guerby Lambert	6-7	325	R-So./3
58	Matty Augustine	6-8	310	R-Fr./4
78	Owen Strebig	6-8	302	R-Fr./4

better? That's what I want our team to be a reflection of.

"Don't worry about who's out there. Just keep getting better. And when your time's called, you've got to perform like those guys in that room have done. I'm as pleased with Coach Rudolph and that O-line as any position on this team."

2. Find The Best Plan B At QB

That doesn't mean Plan A, CJ Carr, doesn't have work to do and room for improvement. But the bigger, faster, stronger, smarter version of him also doesn't need to overdo training camp.

The most impactful thing, in fact, he can do this month is help make the players around him better — through his leadership, through film studies with teammates, through working on timing and chemistry with his route runners.

The spotlight in August will be on three signal-callers who have yet to take their first snap in a college game — redshirt freshman Blake Hebert and true freshmen Noah Grubbs and Teddy Jarrard.

"No. 1, how do you make sure your starting quarterback's prepared?" Freeman said. "We can't cheat his reps to get prepared. But how do you give these three guys opportunities with the twos to perform? And with the threes to perform? And how do we move them around to make sure they're all getting [an] equal amount of opportunities?

"Then, you have to make a decision who's the backup for Week 1. That doesn't mean they're backup for the season. It's something we've never had to do, like, how do you then progress from that?

"And who's going to [run the] scout team? Are we rotating guys on scout team? Those are all logistical things that myself and [quarterbacks] Coach [Gino] Guidugli and Coach Denbrock and I have to figure out."

3. Honing And Refining The Tight End Position

The Irish may not have a clear No. 1, a la Eli Raridon last season ... yet. And they don't necessarily need it. But what they do have is a trio of players, among the six scholarship tight ends on the roster, who can bring needed versatility and high octane to the Irish offense.

Kedren Young — a 5-11, 234-pound redshirt sophomore who missed last season due to a knee injury — has the potential to finish training camp anywhere from running back 1A to the fifth option in the five-man group.

PHOTO BY BILL STREICHER

Redshirt junior Cooper Flanagan, redshirt freshman James Flanigan and true freshman Ian Premer all are believed to have both the ability to be physical in the running game and also be threats in the vertical passing game.

And since the three combined for just 55 college game snaps last season — 51 coming from Flanigan — August becomes about repeating what they learned in the spring, refined during June OTAs and July player-run practices, and getting the base down to a point where they understand how to make changes depending on the opponent from week to week.

The raw material is there and so are depth pieces like redshirt senior Ty Washington, redshirt sophomore Jack Larsen and true freshman Preston Fryzel.

4. Getting The Final Spots In The Wide Receiver Rotation Up To Speed

Here's the math. Essentially wide receivers coach Mike Brown has 10 scholarship players plus lacrosse star Matt Jeffery competing for two spots. The top four in the rotation, provided Ohio State transfer Quincy Porter's recovery timeline from knee surgery continues to be on target, are Jordan Faison, Jaden Greathouse, Porter and fellow Ohio State transfer Mylan Graham.

Redshirt sophomore Micah Gilbert would appear the most likely to lock down one of the final two spots. But don't rule out two of the true freshmen — Kaydon Finley and Devin Fitzgerald.

The bar is much higher for them and everybody else in August, because it's "big boy time."

So, what Brown and the other Irish coaches are looking for is: Are you a consistent route runner? Do you see how the secondary plays you? Can you handle press man coverage? How do you know when to stop and not go too far across the field? In other words, how good are you at finding the windows? And can you catch the ball every time it's thrown to you? You can't drop passes at Notre Dame.

5. Proving There Is Life After Love — And Price

Redshirt sophomore Kedren Young is the wildest of wild cards in a five-man running back room, with the potential to finish training camp anywhere from running back 1A to the fifth option. Most likely the 5-11, 234-pounder will return from a year off due to ACL surgery to land at No. 3 in a three-man rotation.

But the pecking order might not be as firm with these five backs from week to week and even within games as it was in the two-man 2025 rotation of Jeremiyah Love and Jadarian Price. The biggest objective for running backs coach Ja'Juan Seider in August beyond at least loosely defining roles (is Young, for instance, the short-yardage option?) and confirming a three-deep game-day pattern is to be open to being surprised.

That doesn't always happen to the extent that it shakes up the top of the depth chart, but, for example, Seider will get his first look in pads this month at freshman Javian Osborne, who missed spring practice due to wrist surgery.

Seider also likes his running backs well-rounded and to see the game through the eyes of the quarterback. That will be an emphasis of his teaching that should show up in all five becoming better blockers and pass catchers as well. ✦

Christian Gray has spent two seasons as a starter at field corner, but can he make even more plays from a different position in the defensive backfield?
PHOTO BY LARRY BLANKENSHIP

ALL THE ANSWERS

Notre Dame's defense should be much more polished in Chris Ash's second season as defensive coordinator

BY TYLER HORKA

One of the most telling quotes of Notre Dame's offseason came from defensive coordinator Chris Ash: "I know what they need, and last year I didn't."

More specifically, "This year I know what each individual needs from a coaching standpoint, what we need to focus on and make sure we emphasize." That's a pretty important thing for a defensive coordinator to know for all of his players.

It's a remarkably transparent admission from Ash about last year. He essentially said, hey, we didn't exactly have all of our people rowing in the same direction at the beginning of the 2025 season. That was evidenced in averages of 32.7 points and 402 yards surrendered in Notre Dame's first three games of the year, losses to Miami and Texas A&M and a high-scoring victory over Purdue.

In the final nine games of the season, Ash's defense — albeit facing teams not nearly as potent as the Hurricanes and Aggies — averaged 12.6 points and 284 yards allowed per game. His group figured it out.

He figured out his group.

"Everybody had some sort of an issue last year, and we want to make sure last year's problems are not today's problems," Ash said. "If they are, then we're not getting the players better. So, I know what those are. I didn't at this point last year, so it helps me out a lot."

These are some of the main things Ash needs to continue taking into account through preseason camp with the regular season rapidly approaching.

1. Is Christian Gray The Answer At Nickel?

Christian Gray spent the spring steadfastly honing his craft as a slot corner, seemingly content with moving over after two years as a starter at field corner. He sounded adamant that even more plays will come from him lining up at the nickel spot.

"I think nickel is going to be really it for me," he said in April.

New Notre Dame defensive backs coach Aaron Henry is still going to have

Boubacar Traore is a strong candidate to lead Notre Dame in sacks this season, but who will join him in bolstering the Irish pass rush?

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

to see it over time to believe it. Gray made nice strides at nickel in the spring, but can he carry that over into the fall? Or will sophomores Dallas Golden and Jayden Sanders come gunning for playing time?

Exiting the spring, it sounded as if Henry still hadn't had it all fleshed out yet. He said he was excited about who was playing there, but it would remain a good battle to determine a starter closer to the season opener.

"The goal is just to try to develop depth at that position," Henry said. "I think as you get throughout the course of the season, guys get banged up. When you talk about secondary play, you want guys to be able to slide inside and outside, but that's a very unique position in our defense because we ask that guy to be a good blitzer, to be a really good tackler, to cover really well, right? To get to a flat, to get to a half. And so, it's some intricacies there."

If Gray has the intricacies down, he can definitely do enough to earn the starting nod as a senior. If his head is still spinning because it is so different from playing outside, then a guy like Golden who played primarily inside last season could sneak back into the mix and steal the spot away.

There is much to be settled in the slot this fall.

2. Is DJ McKinney The Starter At Field Corner?

There is a scenario in which Gray is still Notre Dame's starting field cornerback. Sure, Notre Dame brought in an experienced player in DJ McKinney to be a starter, but it doesn't mean he has to be. Jalen Stroman got his starting safety designation taken away by a redshirt freshman last season, for instance. Everything is always on the table.

So, again, McKinney not being up to snuff at field corner and Gray getting moved away from nickel and back to the outside is a possibility. So is Sanders starting at field corner. There is no pigeonholing a Notre Dame defensive back contingent this deep. McKinney is a part of that depth, though, and, ideally, he's a staple in the top end of it starting alongside Leonard Moore as Notre Dame's go-to outside corners.

"This year I know what each individual needs from a coaching standpoint, what we need to focus on and make sure we emphasize."

ASH

Head coach Marcus Freeman certainly thinks he's worthy of such a pedestal.

"His film from Colorado was gifted," Freeman said. "He's a talented individual. He's smart, he prepares. And so I'm excited to see what he does as we get into fall camp, but there's high expectations for him."

3. Who Will Help Boubacar Traore As A Pass Rusher?

It's August, and is anyone sure who will be second in sacks among Notre Dame pass rushers at the end of the season? The obvious answer for the guy who's going to lead the way in that category is Boubacar Traore. But who's next in line?

The telling part in all of this is, it could be someone like junior linebacker Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa. Not a defensive tackle, not a defensive end, but a linebacker. It's indicative of the question marks Notre Dame has along the defensive line.

Is Bryce Young ready to make a name

for himself and be a true game-wrecker for opponents on the Notre Dame schedule? Is former Notre Dame commit Keon Keeley, who went to Alabama and spent the first three years of his career with the Crimson Tide, completing the full-circle moment and becoming one of the Irish's best defensive players right before our very eyes?

What about defensive tackle transfers Francis Brewu and Tionne Gray? They were picked up from the portal to be menaces in stopping the run and dictating game flow at the line of scrimmage, but at least a fraction of that has to be by way of getting through to the quarterback on passing downs.

Notre Dame has not been a truly elite pass rushing team despite all the Irish have accomplished defensively during the Freeman era. Linebacking play has been solid because of continuity there. Defensive back play has been the calling card of this side of the ball because of the recruiting and development on the back end. Now, it's got to be a revolution of downright nasty defensive line play. That's the next step. It can tie all of what Notre Dame is doing on defense together and make the Irish as well rounded as they've been since Freeman arrived.

"How do we just continue to attack some of those negative areas and just keep getting better and better and better and better and better?" Freeman said.

BGI PRE-FALL CAMP NOTRE DAME SCHOLARSHIP DEPTH CHART

Here is *Blue & Gold Illustrated's* projection for Notre Dame's 2026 scholarship depth chart on defense heading into fall camp Aug. 6.

DEFENSE

Left Defensive End

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
95	Bryce Young	6-6	260	Jr./2
11	Keon Keeley	6-5	275	R-Jr./2
14	Ebenezer Ewetade	6-4	240	Fr./4
94	Joe Reiff	6-5	264	R-Fr./4

Defensive Tackle

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
47	Jason Onye	6-5	295	R-Sr./1
88	Armel Mukam	6-3	296	R-Jr./2
or 56	Elijah Hughes	6-3	295	Sr./1
6	Christopher Burgess Jr.	6-4	300	R-Fr./4
42	Cole Mullins	6-4	280	R-So./3
90	Elijah Golden	6-4	292	Fr./4
91	Gordy Sulfsted	6-5	275	Fr./4

Nose Tackle

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
7	Francis Brewu	6-1	285	Jr./2
0	Tionne Gray	6-5	330	R-So./3
59	Sean Sevillano Jr.	6-2	320	R-So./3
60	Davion Dixon	6-2	316	R-Fr./4
55	Tiki Hola	6-3	310	Fr./4

Right Defensive End

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
5	Boubacar Traore	6-5	253	R-Jr./2
44	Rodney Dunham	6-4	242	Fr./4
10	Loghan Thomas	6-3	215	Jr./2
40	Dominik Hulak	6-3	260	R-Fr./4

Mike Linebacker

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
34	Drayk Bowen	6-2	232	Sr./1
27	Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa	6-3	230	Jr./2
19	Madden Faraimo	6-2	235	So./3
58	Thomas Davis Jr.	6-2	225	Fr./4
43	Kahanu Kia	6-2	225	R-Jr./2

Will Linebacker

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
4	Jaiden Ausberry	6-1	226	R-Jr./2
3	Jaylen Sneed	6-1	227	R-Sr./1
16	Ko'o Kia	6-2	225	R-Fr./4
35	Teddy Rezac	6-3	226	R-So./3
23	Ja'Kobe Clapper	6-1	230	Fr./4

Boundary Cornerback

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
15	Leonard Moore	6-2	197	Jr./2
12	Jayden Sanders	6-0	195	So./3
13	Ayden Pouncey	6-3	180	Fr./4

Field Cornerback

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
2	DJ McKinney	6-1	185	R-Sr./1
24	Mark Zackery IV	5-10	184	So./3
21	Khary Adams	6-1	187	Fr./4
26	Chaz Smith	6-1	172	Fr./4

Slot Cornerback

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
29	Christian Gray	6-0	186	Sr./1
1	Dallas Golden	6-0	191	So./3
32	Nick Reddish	5-10	195	Fr./4

Boundary Safety

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
8	Adon Shuler	6-0	202	R-Jr./2
28	Luke Talich	6-4	204	Sr./1
25	Brandon Logan	5-11	197	R-Fr./4

Field Safety

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
9	Brauntae Johnson	6-2	200	R-So./3
22	Ethan Long	6-2	204	R-Fr./4
20	Joey O'Brien	6-5	203	Fr./4

SPECIAL TEAMS

Placekicker

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
35	Spencer Porath	6-0	200	Jr./2
36	Micah Drescher	6-5	196	Fr./4

Punter

No.	Player	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.
39	Jasper Scaife	6-6	215	Fr./4
or 18	Erik Schmidt	6-2	211	So./3

4. How Do Coaches And Players Avoid Any Letdowns From The Start?

It all circles back to Notre Dame being a dominant defense in September, not just in October and November. Ash admitted that wasn't how it went in 2025, and Freeman spoke at length with a small group of local reporters in South Bend in late July about the progression of the Notre Dame defense from liability in the first fourth of last season to strength in the final three-fourths.

"There weren't issues in fall camp," he said. "Our defense played really well in fall camp, but it can be so different when you play yourself. You play your own team. It's like, at some point you've got to get away from each other.

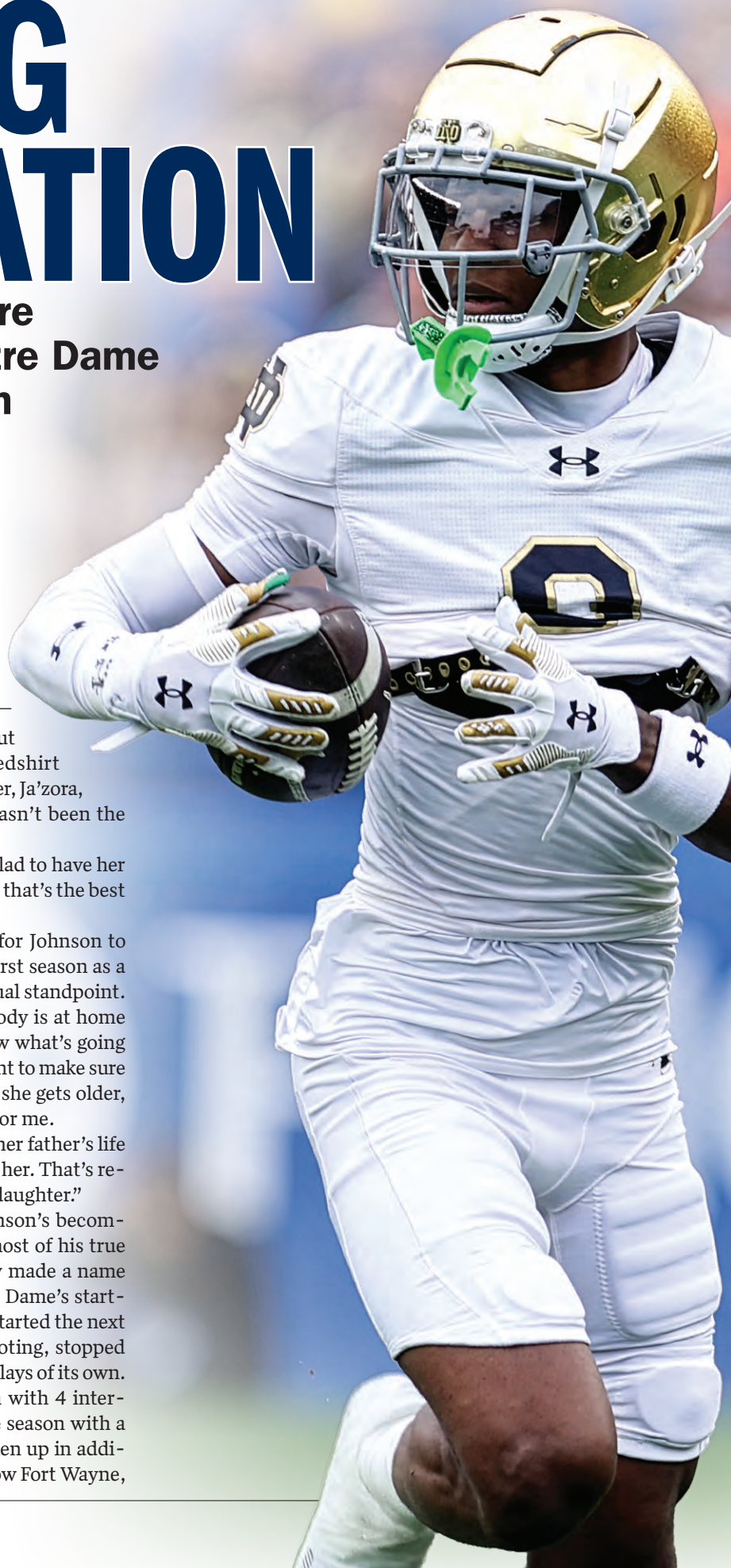
"When I look at the plays in Miami that maybe we gave up defensively, I mean, it's execution. So, as we look back, did we practice that call versus that concept enough? And that's my way of saying, 'Don't just say it was a great play on their part.' No, how can we self-evaluate and say, 'Did we practice the plays that they made enough?' The answer might be, 'Coach, we've never seen them run that.' Let's be more creative. Let's find a way to create plays.

"The thing I look back is like, did we have injuries in fall camp? Did we have guys that couldn't make it through the entire game versus Miami? Why? Let's evaluate what happened during fall camp, where they were at physically, so that we can make sure we have them for the entire game. And so, those are probably more important to me, that we can really utilize to help us as we move forward into how we practice."

Essentially, he's saying he didn't envision Notre Dame getting beat up against Miami and Texas A&M but it happened anyway. This year, it's about doing what's necessary to avoid letdowns against Wisconsin, Rice and so on. ✦

FINDING MOTIVATION

Fatherhood helped inspire breakout season for Notre Dame safety Brauntae Johnson



BY TYLER JAMES

Before Brauntae Johnson became a breakout star in Notre Dame's secondary as a redshirt freshman, he became a father. His daughter, Ja'zora, was born on March 28, 2025. Johnson hasn't been the same since then.

"It changed me as a person," Johnson said. "I'm glad to have her around. I just want to see her. And when I do see her, that's the best thing."

The birth of Ja'zora added more fuel to the fire for Johnson to reach his potential. It's hard to imagine Johnson's first season as a father could have gone much better from an individual standpoint.

"It definitely motivates me a lot, because somebody is at home depending on me," Johnson said. "She doesn't know what's going on right now. She doesn't know what I'm doing. I want to make sure I leave a good enough amount of evidence for when she gets older, she can look back on. And that's just the motivator for me.

"I just want her to be able to get older and look at her father's life and be able to be proud of her dad, like I would be of her. That's really everything. I just want to make a legacy for my daughter."

The rest of college football will realize what Johnson's becoming long before Ja'zora will. Johnson, who missed most of his true freshman season in 2024 with a foot injury, already made a name for himself last fall when he was inserted into Notre Dame's starting lineup in the third game of the season. Then he started the next seven games while the Irish secondary found its footing, stopped giving up so many big plays and started creating big plays of its own.

Johnson finished the season second on the team with 4 interceptions despite missing the final two games of the season with a hand injury. He tallied 48 tackles and 3 passes broken up in addition to the takeaways. His success even inspired fellow Fort Wayne,

Johnson was a Football Writers Association of America Freshman All-American in 2025 and starts this campaign as a Phil Steele second-team pre-season All-American.

PHOTO BY FRANK HYATT

Ind., product Mylan Graham, a wide receiver, to transfer from Ohio State to Notre Dame for his redshirt sophomore season.

"Seeing his success made this a no-brainer for me," Graham said during the spring.

Graham never doubted that Johnson had the kind of potential that's already produced way-too-early buzz as a first-round prospect for next year's NFL Draft. But it wasn't that long ago that Johnson, who mostly played wide receiver, cornerback and quarterback at Fort Wayne North Side High School, was learning some of the basic nuances of manning the safety position.

When Adon Shuler earned his starting safety role as a redshirt freshman in 2024, he had All-America safety Xavier Watts to help guide him along in the Irish secondary. Shuler, who served as one of the team's captains last season as a redshirt sophomore, took Johnson under his wing.

"He helped me really just be a pro," Johnson said of Shuler. "That's the main thing for me, just being a pro at everything I do. And he stays on me about that.

"It's a big brother, little brother relationship. I can tell him if I feel like something's off, and he can tell me, which he's been doing since my freshman year. So, definitely a big brother and somebody I looked up to coming in."

The chemistry between Shuler and Johnson became obvious on the playing field. They complemented each other well and made it more difficult to find daylight in Notre Dame's secondary.

"It's like a duo. We feed off each other," Shuler said. "If I make a play, Tae Tae's going to make a play soon and vice versa. That's always been the theme here with [Watts] and me and whoever else before that. There's always two guys to make plays.

"One guy to be the vocal guy, one guy to be the wild child. That's what I call Tae Tae, the wild child."

The wild child moniker, Shuler explained, describes the way Johnson flies around the football field to make plays. He ends up in unexpected places in expected ways, which can be difficult to deal with for an opposing quarterback.

"I feel like that's a lot of my identity, and I feel like everybody has roles for the team," Johnson said. "I feel like that's my role, to make the wild interceptions, make the wild play, the wild tackle.

"That's my role for the team, and that's what the team needs me to do. So, that's where I'm going to step up, and I'm going to make them plays for the team."

Johnson has already become a new version of himself by requesting to be listed as his given name, Brauntae, on Notre Dame's roster rather than Tae or Tae Tae, which most of his teammates and friends call him. Notre Dame co-defensive coordinator/defensive backs coach Aaron Henry quickly learned Johnson's name when he joined the program this winter. He didn't need to study a lot of film to understand Johnson's potential. In a secondary loaded with talent, Johnson still stood out.

"Tae Tae has all the ability in the world. He's super special. He's probably better than or as talented as any DB I've ever had the luxury to coach. The sky's the limit for him. It truly, truly is."

NOTRE DAME DEFENSIVE BACKS COACH AARON HENRY ON JOHNSON

"Tae Tae has all the ability in the world," Henry said. "He's super special. He's probably better than or as talented as any DB I've ever had the luxury to coach. The sky's the limit for him. It truly, truly is."

The job for Henry is to make sure Johnson continues to develop and doesn't become complacent with all the praise that's come his way. Because Johnson already has the motivation of fatherhood, that shouldn't be too much of a concern.

"He has to continue to be where his feet are and believe in what we're coaching him to do," Henry said. "But yeah, he has all the potential in the world." ✦

25 FOR '26

These are *BGI*'s top 25 most important Notre Dame players of 2026

BY BGI STAFF

Each year in the Marcus Freeman era, ranking the top 25 most important Notre Dame football players has become a greater challenge. With the roster getting more talented and deeper, determining who to include gets harder and harder.

The exception, of course, was the top spot. There's a unanimous No. 1 this year, and you can probably guess who it is.

This list is not necessarily ranking the best players or the top NFL prospects. It's a list of the most important players. Voters considered talent, impact, place on the depth chart and positional value, but a premium is placed on these two questions:

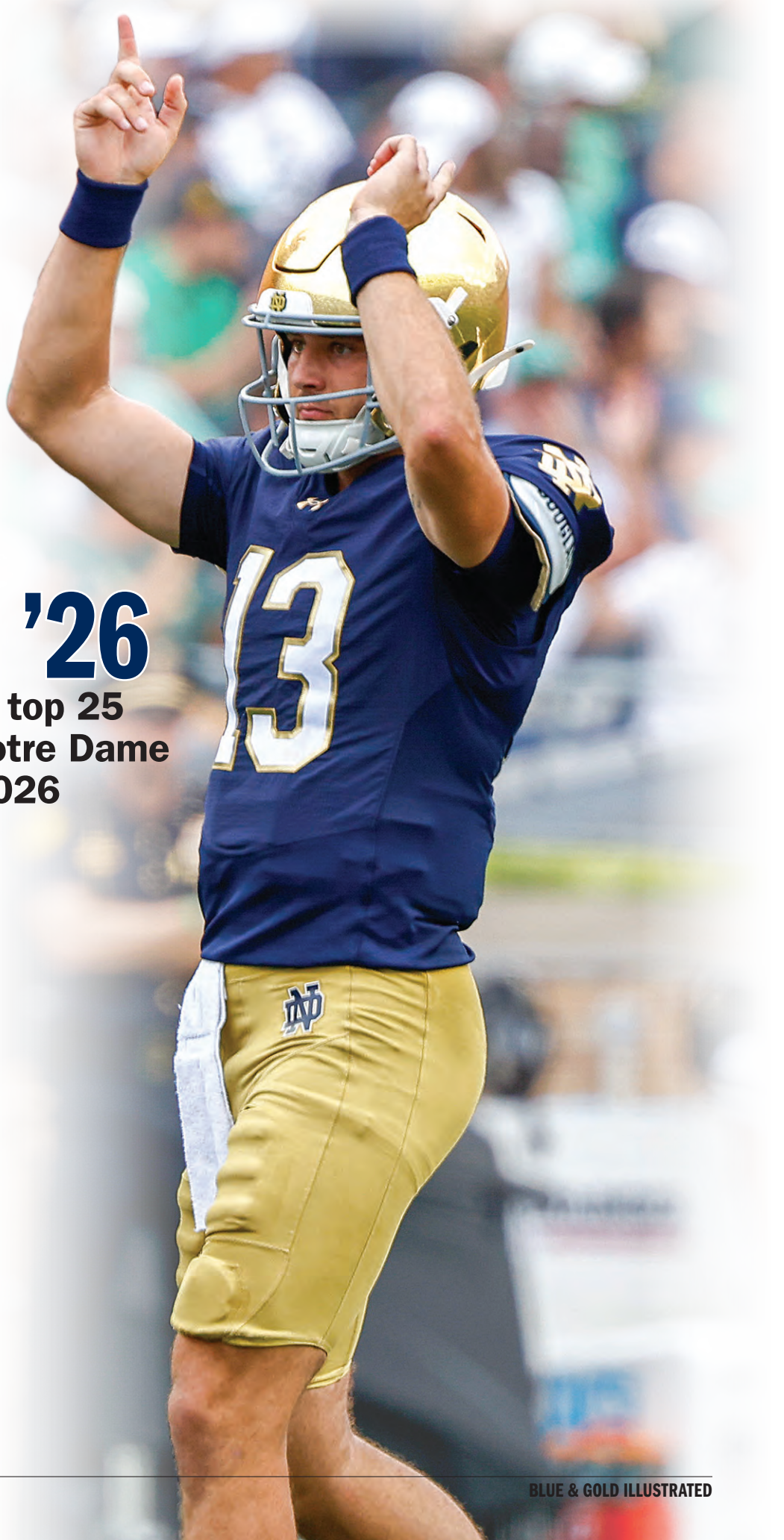
1) If you subtracted this individual from the roster, how much of a setback would it be? And 2) If this less proven player emerges and makes an impact, how much does that raise the ceiling (or lower it, if a breakout does not happen as expected)?

With that in mind, here are *BGI*'s top 25 most important Notre Dame football players of 2026.

1. QB CJ CARR

Jeremiyah Love and Jadarian Price are gone. Notre Dame's offense needs an engine. Despite playing a different position, Carr is the player who has to step up the most without the superstar running backs. He was tremendously efficient in 2025, but he often dealt with quarterback-friendly defensive setups as teams did everything they could to stop Love and Price. He'll now have to beat defenses that are doing everything they can to stop him.

There's no question in anyone at



CJ Carr, the returning starting quarterback and a Heisman Trophy candidate, was a unanimous pick for Notre Dame's most important player of 2026.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

Notre Dame's mind that Carr is up to the challenge. He's extremely advanced in his understanding of the offense, which means he can check the Irish out of bad plays and into good ones with regularity. If something does happen to Carr, Notre Dame might be up a creek without a paddle. Its two primary backup quarterback options are a true freshman (Noah Grubbs) and a redshirt freshman (Blake Hebert) who played zero snaps in 2025. The Irish cannot afford to lose their star at the most important position in sports.

2. CB LEONARD MOORE

Moore is a true shutdown cornerback, which is one of the most valuable chess pieces a team can have on its board. He can either shut down half the field or take away the opponent's No. 1 wide receiver, whichever Notre Dame believes will help it win a given game.

We learned last October that his capabilities extend to the slot. The Irish had him shadow Biletnikoff Award winner Makai Lemon, and he limited Southern Cal's best offensive threat to just 2 receptions for 28 yards when he covered him.

The best player on Notre Dame's 2026 schedule is another electric slot receiver in Miami's Malachi Toney, so Moore's presence is critical for winning that game and making a deep run in January. When teams do throw at No. 15, he is also extremely adept at creating turnovers (5 interceptions in just 10 games in 2025).

3. DE BOUBACAR TRAORE

Traore's ceiling has always been evident, and Notre Dame now knows his floor is a more-than-solid edge rusher capable of anchoring his team's pass rush. He totaled 6.5 sacks and 10.5 tackles for loss in 2025.

It would not surprise anyone in South Bend if Traore took the next step in 2026 and became the team's first truly elite edge rusher in quite some time, filling a hole that has existed since at least 2023 (Isaiah Foskey) at perhaps the most important position on defense.

Traore truly separates himself with regards to one of the two key questions voters considered: "If you subtracted this individual from the roster, how much of a setback would it be?" One could argue that if No. 5 was removed from the equation, the floor for Notre Dame's pass rush (and run defense on the edge) would drop off a cliff.

Leonard Moore can either shut down half the field or take away the opponent's No. 1 wide receiver, making him the most important player on defense for the Irish this season.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

4. OG ANTHONIE KNAPP

Knapp continued to prove doubters wrong through two seasons as an unexpected starter at left tackle for Notre Dame. After allowing 4 sacks and 31 pressures on 451 pass-blocking snaps, per Pro Football Focus, as a freshman in 2024, Knapp improved those numbers to allowing just 1 sack and 11 pressures on 334 pass-blocking snaps as a sophomore last season.

What made him so proficient in moving defenders in the running game at left tackle — his physicality and strength — should apply in his transition to left guard. The experience Knapp gained the past two seasons will be invaluable to Notre Dame's offensive line. The Irish could very well open preseason camp with four first-team offensive linemen with fewer combined starts than Knapp alone.

5. WR JORDAN FAISON

Faison posted statistics last season that all of Notre Dame's other wideouts would dream of: 49 catches, 640 yards and 4 touchdowns. And he's been doing it every season for the Irish ever since he was inserted into the regular rotation as a walk-on midway through his true freshman year.

Faison has recorded 98 receptions for 1,318 yards and 9 touchdowns in his career. He's quietly putting together one of the best four-year runs we've seen from a Notre Dame wide receiver in quite some time. One of the only Irish wide receivers of the last decade with better numbers than those over a four-year stretch was Chase Claypool.

Faison is Carr's go-to guy among Notre Dame pass catchers, and he's got the physical and mental goods to push his ceiling even higher this year.

6. S BRAUNTAE JOHNSON

Johnson is on a trajectory to be Notre Dame's next consensus All-American at safety, following Kyle Hamilton (2021) and Xavier Watts (2023, 2024). The potential turned into production quickly last season for Johnson, despite not becoming a starter until Game 3 and missing Games 11 and 12 due to a wrist injury.

He was a cornerback out of necessity and played only 39 snaps in 2024 after missing much of the regular season with a broken bone in his left foot. And yet in 2025, he amassed 48 tackles in 10 games, tied for fourth on the team, with 3 passes broken up and 4 interceptions. Pro Football Focus graded Johnson as the third-best tackler in the FBS regardless of position (91.0 grade).

He could make both the routine plays and the spectacular, momentum-changing ones, and he earned FWAA Freshman All-America honors as a redshirt freshman.

7. LB DRAYK BOWEN

Bowen registered the most defensive snaps of any non-defensive back for Notre Dame in 2025. The only reason he didn't have the same title in 2024 was because Jack Kiser barely beat him out. Bowen has been a workhorse from the moment he stepped on campus in 2023.

Bowen was a team captain last season, and should be a shoo-in to reclaim that honor this season, and he's still a special teams staple for Notre Dame. It's obviously much more than just being a team guy for Bowen, though. At his best, he's one of the top middle linebackers in the country.

Notre Dame's leading tackler is a cross between the big, bad, old-school bully who delivers bone-crunching blows and the new-age LB who can run sideline to sideline and make incredibly athletic plays.

8. LB KYNGSTONN VILIAMU-ASA

It's a mental tug-of-war between Viliamu-Asa's encouraging-but-still-imprecise recovery timeline and the projection of what he'll look like when he reaches full health. Per Pro Football Focus, the junior from California's Inland Empire is the top returning linebacker in all of college football and was No. 2 in 2025, behind only Texas Tech unanimous All-American Jacob Rodriguez.

Where Viliamu-Asa shows up most prominently in the advanced metrics is his run defense. As the No. 2 run defender at any position in college football last season, he helped Notre Dame improve from No. 49 nationally in rush defense to No. 12 — the Irish's highest ranking in that statistical category since the 2012 national runners-up finished 11th.

And because he's also an elite coverage linebacker — eighth in the FBS in 2025, per PFF — All-America status should be an expectation, even with perhaps a staggered start.

Boubacar Traore anchored Notre Dame's pass rush in 2025, totaling 6.5 sacks and 10.5 tackles for loss.
PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

9. S ADON SHULER

The makeup of Notre Dame's secondary doesn't require Shuler to make flashy plays in coverage. As the leader of the group, he can worry more about preventing big plays than creating them. But that won't stop him from finding opportunities to make big plays of his own, too.

Shuler finished second on Notre Dame's defense in tackles with 53 last season, which nearly matched his total of 59 as a 16-game starter in 2024. He added 2 interceptions, 2 forced fumbles, 5 passes broken up and 3 tackles for loss as a versatile force.

Shuler will likely be named a captain once again, and he can continue to build upon his great chemistry with Johnson on the back end of the defense. Shuler brings a physicality that helps set the tone for the secondary.

10. RB ANEYAS WILLIAMS

Williams impressed the heck out of running backs coach Ja'Juan Seider in the spring, when the 5-foot-10, 210-pound junior was supposed to be limited during the 15 Irish practices staged in March and April. Instead, he treated his surgically repaired elbow like it was a boo-boo, mixing it up in scrimmages even with the "don't touch me" red jersey on.

Williams isn't Love or Price, but what he can be for the Irish is the No. 1

back, with a knack for converting on short-yardage situations and being a real threat in the passing game. An 800- to 900-yard rushing season, combined with Williams' strong receiving skill set, would help the nation's No. 2 scoring offense in 2025 have a shot at No. 1 in 2026.

And if he can help change the dark 2025 narrative on third-and-short and goal-line situations, all the better.

11. DT FRANCIS BREWU

The reunion of Brewu and defensive line coach Charlie Partridge, who recruited him to Pitt, could be a fruitful one for both of them. The Irish needed a destructive presence on the interior of the defensive line, and Brewu showed an ability to do just that in his first two seasons at Pitt with 42 tackles, 8.5 tackles for loss and 2.5 sacks in 19 games.

Brewu, a two-time member of Bruce Feldman's Freaks List, might be the most physically impressive defensive tackle on Notre Dame's roster. He's freakishly strong — squats and bench presses in the 700-pound and 500-pound range, respectively — and explosive. Notre Dame just doesn't have many defensive tackles with that kind of makeup.

12. OT WILL BLACK

Black, whom Rivals ranked as the No. 1 offensive tackle and No. 4 overall player in the 2025 class, will get a chance to prove he was worth the hype sooner rather than later. Offensive line coach Joe Rudolph cleared the way for Black to become Notre Dame's starting left tackle by moving Knapp, who started 27 games at the position the past two seasons, inside to left guard in the offseason.

It's an experiment expected to stick because both have the potential to thrive in their new roles. The entire offensive line should benefit more from Black and Knapp playing their natural positions, but those benefits only come through if Black excels in his first season in the spotlight. No pressure, kid.

13. OT GUERBY LAMBERT

Lambert started all 12 games for Notre Dame at right guard last season, but Rudolph made the decision to move him out to right tackle to replace 28-game starter Aamil Wagner. While Lambert made strides as a guard last season, tackle should be a more natural position for him to highlight his athletic traits. That's why there's so much confidence in his ability to make the transition to right tackle.

With Notre Dame planning to debut a first-year starter at left tackle in Black, there's even more importance on Lambert to be reliable on the right side. The Irish certainly have talented and less experienced options who could fill in for Lambert, but he's a clear cut above in terms of readiness for the role.

With Notre Dame's top two rushers from 2025 off to the NFL, Aneyas Williams will step up into the No. 1 running back role.

PHOTO BY CHAD WEAVER

14. DE BRYCE YOUNG

The hype train for Young last offseason may have made the expectations for his true sophomore season too lofty. Though Young didn't turn into a sack machine in 2025, he still finished second on the team in pressures with 29 and had just two fewer pressures than Traore, who was on the field for 92 more pass rush snaps, per PFF.

Young, who only started last season's opener at Miami, should be able to claim a starting role in 2026. The departure of Joshua Burnham, who transferred to Indiana in the offseason, elevated his importance on the defensive line. The Irish need Young to keep progressing and become even more of an impact player on all three downs.

15. DT JASON ONYE

Onye brings the most experience to Notre Dame's 2026 defensive line, but the Irish didn't bring him back for a sixth season solely because of the 31 games on his résumé. Onye has continued to improve throughout his Notre Dame career and is coming off his best season yet with nine starts in 2025. PFF gave Onye the best pass rush grade (78.3) among all Irish front seven defenders last season.

He was credited with 17 pressures on 183 pass rush snaps, and six of his seven best run defense grades last season came in the second half of the schedule. The presence of Onye allows Notre Dame to play some of the team's less experienced tackles without the pressure that comes with a starting role.

16. CB CHRISTIAN GRAY

Gray has been one of Notre Dame's

most used players the last two seasons, with 1,434 defensive snaps logged in those years. That will remain the case for a third consecutive season, despite his apparent move to nickel back. His upside and ability to make game-changing plays — he's responsible for two of the most significant interceptions in recent program history — is too valuable to remove from the equation.

It remains to be seen how effective Gray is in the nickel spot, but the Irish have made it clear they're set on investing in him there. Gray has heard critiques from detractors ad nauseam during his Notre Dame career, but he keeps showing up and he keeps showing out on the field.

17. WR QUINCY PORTER

It's too soon to say Porter is Notre Dame's make-or-break player at boundary receiver, but based on what was observed in the spring (Porter was out rehabbing an injury) he's got to be the team's most talented option to play the position. So, if he plays it well, that elevates Notre Dame's offensive ceiling considerably. If he is no better than his alternatives, the Irish have issues in terms of boundary receiver production.

With Carnell Tate leaving Ohio State this offseason, Porter had a clear avenue to becoming Jeremiah Smith's sidekick. But what if that's not what he wanted for himself? As Notre Dame's most physically imposing receiver, he's got more of a shot of asserting dominance in South Bend.

18. CB DJ MCKINNEY

Notre Dame could survive the season without McKinney, given all of the talent at defensive back, but it definitely doesn't want to. The Irish lured in the transfer from Colorado with the idea of him starting along with Moore at outside corner. With Gray's move to nickel it sure looks like that's what's going to happen.

McKinney has played more than 2,000 snaps at the college level, even with being injured for a few games last season and hardly playing at all as a freshman at Oklahoma State in 2022. McKinney has three times as many passes defended and interceptions (11 of the former, 4 of the latter) compared to touchdowns allowed (5) in the last two seasons.

19. WR MYLAN GRAHAM

There's a growing sense that Graham could be good enough to leapfrog Faison as Notre Dame's No. 1 wide receiver. It's not going to be easy, given Faison is the most experienced and most productive wideout on the roster by a wide margin. But Graham has "playmaker" written all over him, and he's finally at a place where he'll have the playing time to prove it.

Graham is Notre Dame's projected starter at slot receiver, and there is nobody stopping him from being the Irish's Plan A, B and C at that spot but himself. He'll go as far as he's willing to work for this season, and many people around the program are expecting him to seize the opportunity.

20. TE COOPER FLANAGAN

Flanagan is slated to be Notre Dame's No. 1 tight end, despite missing almost all of the 2025 season coming back from an Achilles injury. While Flanagan has only 5 catches for 74 yards in his college career to date, Notre Dame's coaching staff has raved about the toughness — particularly as a run blocker — he brings to the offense.

The question is whether Flanagan can contribute to the level of his predecessors in the receiving game. However, the Irish clearly believe they missed his blocking last season. Flanagan could help solve Notre Dame's short-yardage problem and contribute in the red zone, where 3 of his 5 career receptions went for touchdowns.

21. C ASHTON CRAIG

A standout offensive lineman who has had trouble staying on the field, Craig started just nine games over the past two seasons due to back-to-back torn ACLs. He said in spring practice that he expects to be available for Week 1, and when he's healthy, he's a difference-maker for Notre Dame.

The Irish love to run the ball, and they will not have the benefit of arguably the two best running backs in college football this season. You can hide a weakness at center in pass protection, but an elite one makes a huge impact in the run game. Craig played at an elite level in 2025, particularly on Notre Dame's outside zone concepts.

22. OG CHARLES JAGUSAH

Speaking of oft-injured offensive linemen, how do you rank an elite player you're not sure will play a down this season? Our voters' choices ranged from No. 10 to out of the rankings entirely. For those who did rank Jagusah, his performances against Penn State and Ohio State in the 2024 CFP are seared into our brains.

Jagusah was, in layman's terms, really freakin' good in those games. However, due to a broken humerus and its subsequent complications over the next year, Jagusah has not played since. It is not publicly known when, or even if, he'll play again. But if he does return, Jagusah is a massive ceiling raiser who could give Notre Dame a Joe Moore Award-worthy offensive line.

23. LB JAIDEN AUSBERRY

As good as Viliamu-Asa was in 2025, Ausberry actually started over him at Will linebacker. In two seasons of meaningful playing time — and he plays a lot — he has made 109 tackles, including 10.5 for loss. Every defense needs playmakers, and he's one of Notre Dame's best.

THE POLL

The top 25 was put together by seven *BGI* staffers who each sent in their own top 25 ballots. It was tabulated the same way as the Associated Press Top 25: A first-place vote received 25 points, a second-place vote received 24 points and so on.

The tiebreaker system works as follows: 1) Most first-place votes, 2) Most total votes, 3) Highest vote.

Rk.	Name, Pos.	Points (1st-place votes)
1.	CJ Carr, QB	175 (7)
2.	Leonard Moore, CB	166
3.	Boubacar Traore, DE	156
4.	Anthonie Knapp, OG	135
5.	Jordan Faison, WR	133
6.	Brauntae Johnson, S	132
7.	Drayk Bowen, LB	131
8.	Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa, LB	130
9.	Adon Shuler, S	118
10.	Aneyas Williams, RB	108
11.	Francis Brewu, DT	100
12.	Will Black, OT	85
13.	Guerby Lambert, OT	85
14.	Bryce Young, DE	79
15.	Jason Onye, DT	69
16.	Christian Gray, CB	62
17.	Quincy Porter, WR	58
18.	DJ McKinney, CB	57
19.	Mylan Graham, WR	57
20.	Cooper Flanagan, TE	42
21.	Ashton Craig, C	42
22.	Charles Jagusah, OG	34
23.	Jaiden Ausberry, LB	30
24.	Jaden Greathouse, WR	24
25.	Keon Keeley, DE	13

Ausberry is the quintessential modern 4-2-5 Will. What he lacks in size, he makes up with quick-darting speed. He needs to be one step ahead of the offensive line to be successful against the run, but he usually is. Ausberry will pick up a ton of tackles for loss by evading blockers and beating them to the spot, and his speed is helpful in Notre Dame's coverage scheme.

24. WR JADEN GREATHOUSE

Barring some kind of regular-season catastrophe, the success or failure of Notre Dame's season will be determined during the College Football Playoff. And few (if any) Fighting Irish have experienced as much playoff success as Greathouse, who caught 13 passes for 233 yards and 3 touchdowns in the semifinals and national championship of the 2024 CFP.

The follow-up in 2025? Four receptions for 73 yards in four games before suffering a hamstring injury that wound up ending his season. However, Notre Dame has not lost sight of what Greathouse is capable of on the football field. If he gets healthy and stays that way, the comeback could be far greater than the setback for the "big slot" receiver.

25. DE KEON KEELEY

Middling defensive end production has held the Irish back from true defensive dominance in recent years, especially against the nation's top offenses. And typically, you need at least three quality edge rushers to form a high-end group. Enter Keeley, who looked like he was turning a corner at the tail end of his third season at Alabama.

Despite underwhelming with the Crimson Tide after flipping from Notre Dame, Keeley still has the crazy physical tools that made him the No. 2 recruit in the country out of high school. If he figures it out — *really* figures it out — he could be the missing piece that takes the Irish defense to the top of the sport. ✦

Honorable Mentions

These 10 players received at least one vote in the top 25 polls submitted by seven *Blue & Gold Illustrated* staff members.

DT TIONNE GRAY

The 6-foot-5, 330-pounder arrived at Notre Dame this offseason as the No. 6 defensive lineman and No. 69 overall player in the transfer portal, despite sitting behind two All-Big Ten selections at Oregon. Notre Dame learned during its 2024 run to the national championship game that it needed more depth along the defensive line. Gray gives the Irish exactly that, with the upside to develop into much more than a rotational piece.

RB KEDREN YOUNG

How do you replace two first-round NFL Draft picks from your running back room after losing Jeremiyah Love and Jadarian Price? There is no singular answer. Junior tailback Aneyas Williams will be the headline act for the Irish run game this season. But don't underestimate the value of Young in a supporting role.

K SPENCER PORATH

Notre Dame has had only four kickers in program history match or exceed Porath's 2025 field goal percentage of 88.2. This could be a record-setting season for the Fighting Irish in the kicking department. At the least, the Irish know they are on solid footing with Porath as their placekicker. That's way more than they could say a season ago, which was a major talking point all fall.

RB NOLAN JAMES JR.

The No. 2 running back role may still be up for grabs heading into preseason camp, but James should enter it as the favorite to win the job. He took advantage of his opportunities in the spring and looks better than he did in small glimpses as a freshman last season. James won't have a role comparable to Price last season, but he should be able to carve out an impactful one.

LB JAYLEN SNEED

Sneed's appeal is that, per Pro Football Focus, he was the best tackler among the linebackers who logged more than 40 snaps in 2025 and fifth overall. He was also the best pass rusher among the linebackers and fifth overall. Throw in resilience, leadership and versatility, and that won multiple voters over.

Tionne Gray arrived at Notre Dame this offseason as the No. 6 defensive lineman and No. 69 overall player in the transfer portal, despite sitting behind two All-Big Ten selections at Oregon.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

S LUKE TALICH

Good things happen when the ball finds Talich, and it sure seems to find him a lot. He had 3 interceptions (third among Irish DBs), 3 passes broken up (tied for third) and 9 defensive stops (fourth) on just 205 defensive snaps (10th). Talich also gets most of his meaningful reps in key situations, including short yardage, two-minute drill and third-and-long.

DE RODNEY DUNHAM

Five-star defensive ends don't come around very often at Notre Dame. Dunham showed enough in the spring that he's a plug-and-play pass rusher capable of being in the top-four edge players on a team that will need that quality in abundance if it's going to realistically chase national title aspirations in 2026.

C JOE OTTING

Notre Dame's projected starting center, Ashton Craig, is attempting to return from his second torn ACL. Otting proved last season he can capably anchor the offensive line, and he should provide even more with another year of experience. Offensive line coach Harry Hiestand loved Otting as a recruit in the 2023 class, and he's beginning to show why.

CB JAYDEN SANDERS

Sanders' spring game performance convinced a voter he could be more than just a rotational cornerback this season. Then there's what he accomplished as a true freshman at Michigan. According to Pro Football Focus, Sanders graded as the Wolverines' sixth-best defender while appearing in 12 games and making two starts. Don't be surprised if Sanders works his way into a significant role.

TE IAN PREMER

Notre Dame might not have a potent receiving threat among its returning tight ends on the 2026 roster. Premer could fill that void even as a true freshman. The five-star recruit brings a well-rounded skill set to Notre Dame, and he may be hard to keep off the field. Premer will be a playmaker during his Notre Dame career; it's just a matter of whether it happens this soon.

— BGI Staff

No Notre Dame player has racked up more tackles the past two seasons than linebacker Drayk Bowen's 145 (78 in 2024 and 67 in 2025).

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

SENIORS WITH OPTIONS

New eligibility rule allows fifth year for entire 2023 class

BY TYLER JAMES

Most of Notre Dame's 2023 recruiting class already had two seasons of eligibility remaining entering 2026, because at some point during their first three seasons of college football, they met the requirements for a redshirt season.

Only three players who were recruited out of high school by Notre Dame and signed with the Irish as scholarship players in the 2023 class didn't redshirt in any of the past three seasons: linebacker Drayk Bowen, wide receiver Jordan Faison and cornerback Christian Gray. But instead of entering their final season of eligibility in 2026, a new rule from the NCAA will allow them to play at the collegiate level for a fifth season regardless of how much they play this fall.

This summer, the NCAA adopted an age-based eligibility model that gives all Division I student-athletes up to five years of eligibility if they enroll in college no later than the academic year after their 19th birthday. That change will be fully implemented for the incoming class of freshmen in the fall of 2027, but student-athletes who entered the 2026-27 school year with remaining eligibility can apply that rule if it benefits them more than the old model that allowed four seasons of eligibility in five years.

That means the upcoming college football season doesn't necessarily have to be the last for Bowen, Faison and Gray. That also applies to senior defensive tackle Elijah Hughes, who transferred from Southern Cal in 2025, and senior safety Luke Talich, who initially came to Notre Dame as a preferred walk-on.

The trio of Bowen, Faison and Gray might not be interested in returning to college football following the 2026 season. They've each been in a starting role at Notre Dame for at least one season and have received many opportunities to prove their potential worth to the NFL. But with money legally flowing to student-athletes in the current landscape, they may have more to consider this winter than previously anticipated.

Hughes and Talich seem like prime candidates to stick around in college football for another year, even if it's not at Notre Dame. They could use more start-

ing opportunities to maximize their value before wrapping up their college careers.

What the extra season of eligibility gives Bowen, Faison and Gray is more flexibility. The 2026 season doesn't have to be all-or-nothing. If they don't reach their expectations, they can rebound in 2027 before testing the NFL market.

Bowen has the chance to be Notre Dame's leading tackler for the second consecutive season. Faison could be Notre Dame's leading receiver for the second consecutive season. Gray's role this fall may be less certain.

Gray, who intercepted 5 passes and started 25 games the past two seasons, has been given a chance to win the starting nickel back role after spending his first three seasons playing on the outside. Notre Dame took a risk in bringing in Colorado cornerback transfer DJ McKinney to potentially improve the secondary. If Gray excels at nickel back, the Irish will look extremely smart. If the experiment fails, Gray doesn't have to end his career on a sour note. That's the beauty of the extra year of eligibility.

BOWEN RETURNS HEALTHY, MOTIVATED

Bowen learned in the middle of last season that he tore the labrum in his right hip, but it wasn't an injury that forced him to be sidelined. He worked through the injury with extra treatment and attention to recovery before undergoing surgery in January.

Bowen was sidelined for most of spring practices while focusing on his rehab plan.

"It feels great," Bowen told On3's Pete Nakos in July. "I worked really hard this spring with treatment and with the training staff to make sure I was ready.

"In May, I used that as a building phase to get ready for the summer. Then we had a great summer with the strength coaches and the team, and everybody pushed me to get back and make sure I'm ready for fall camp."

As a returning captain and two-year starter, Bowen focused his offseason leadership on learning from the mistakes that led to early-season losses the past two years.

"You can't go 0-2 to start the year and expect to be in the playoffs," Bowen told Nakos. "We did everything we could to put ourselves in that position, but at the end of the day, it didn't go our way.

"So, the first thing was learning the lessons, and then using that to fuel us this spring, into summer, and now into fall camp. It left a not-great taste in everybody's mouth about how last year went, as it should."

No Notre Dame player has racked up more tackles the past two seasons than Bowen's 145 (78 in 2024 and 67 in 2025). He's been a consistent presence in a defense that will have even higher expectations this fall.

Luke Talich, who contributed 25 tackles and 3 interceptions last season, has added some linebacker responsibilities in addition to his primary safety role.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

Wide receiver Jaden Greathouse was hampered by a hamstring injury in 2025, but his performance at the end of the 2024 season (13 catches for 233 yards and 3 touchdowns in the final two CFP games) shows he could be an X-factor for the Irish this year.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

"I could go on and on about this defense, but I expect our defense to be one of the top defenses," Bowen told Nakos. "I don't think anybody in this building — or on the defense — would expect anything less. The amount of leadership we have coming back, the returning players, the new players coming in — I don't think there's anything that could stop us from reaching that goal."

THE IMPACT WALK-ON

Talich came to Notre Dame with little guaranteed in his football career as a preferred walk-on. That's why it shouldn't surprise anyone that he was willing to tackle more assignments in Notre Dame's defense this offseason.

The Irish started to experiment in the back half of last season with playing Talich, a safety, in more of a linebacker role against teams that liked to throw out of 12 personnel (one running back and two tight ends) sets. Talich's work in similar roles was amplified in the spring. Talich essentially became a strong-side (Sam) linebacker in various situations. Add that to the list of roles given to the versatile defender and special teams ace.

"This spring I'm kind of focusing on learning a bunch of different positions," Talich said in April. "Playing Sam linebacker, playing dime, which is kind of like Will linebacker, and playing safety, obviously, both sides. So just understanding the defense in and out. I'm getting used to all those positions, and trying different things has definitely been my focus."

Of the 205 defensive snaps Pro Football Focus charted for Talich last season, he spent 92 of them in the box and 47 of them as the slot corner. Defensive coordinator Chris Ash moved him all over the place, and this spring has provided even more possibilities. Talich — who recorded 25 tackles, 3 interceptions, 3 pass breakups and 1 tackle for loss in 12 games last season — brings too much value to the defense to only see the field in extreme circumstances or when starters Adon Shuler, a redshirt junior, and Brauntae Johnson, a redshirt sophomore, need a break.

Talich, a senior, hasn't played linebacker since he was in high school, but junior linebacker Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa's ACL injury in November created a void that Talich could fill. He's probably better suited to cover opposing tight ends than any Notre Dame linebacker not named Viliamu-Asa, so the Irish are rounding out his skills.

"It's been an adjustment for sure being here," Talich said. "But I gained a little weight in the offseason, so I have a pretty good frame for that position. So, they're just trying me out there, and I'm getting used to it and getting better for sure."

TRANSFERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Of the eight players who transferred out of Notre Dame since signing with the Irish in the 2023 class, two have the best chance to have breakout seasons in 2026: Kentucky quarterback Kenny Minchey and Virginia wide receiver Rico Flores Jr.

Minchey is the obvious choice. After briefly committing to transfer to Nebraska in January, he found arguably a better fit for himself in Kentucky with new head coach Will Stein.

Minchey spent last season on the bench after losing the starting quarterback competition to CJ Carr, but only after a tight battle that went deep into August. Stein

spent the last three seasons as an offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach working wonders for Oregon quarterbacks Bo Nix, Dillon Gabriel and Dante Moore. Now Minchey will get his turn to take the steering wheel in a Stein offense.

Flores made a name for himself as a freshman at Notre Dame with 27 receptions for 392 yards and 1 touchdown. Unfortunately for Flores, those still remain his career highs after spending the past two seasons at UCLA, one of which was cut short by a knee injury.

Flores transferred this offseason to a Virginia program that's featured quality wide receivers under head coach Tony Elliott. Three receivers have produced at least 800 receiving yards in each of the past three seasons at Virginia: Malik Washington (1,426 in 2023), Malachi Fields (811 in 2023 and 808 in 2024) and Trell Harris (847 in 2025). Can Flores be next in line as a star receiver for the Cavaliers? ✦

SENIOR CLASS REVIEW

Players Signed: 23
Players Available In 2026: 13 (8 transfers, 1 NFL, 1 medical retirement)
2023 Recruiting Rankings: No. 13 by On3, No. 12 by 247Sports, No. 11 by Rivals and No. 7 by ESPN

Name	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.

Sullivan Absher — OL — 6-7 — 320
Made the first five starts of his career last season after replacing an injured Billy Schrauth at left guard; will be given chance to win starting right guard role this season.

Jaiden Ausberry — LB — 6-1 — 226
Played in all 28 games and recorded 109 tackles the past two seasons following a redshirt season as a freshman; will continue to be a starter or rotational player at linebacker.

Micah Bell — RB — 5-10 — 185
Transferred out of Notre Dame as a cornerback following his freshman season with three game appearances; spent one season at Vanderbilt (no appearances) before playing in five games on special teams at Georgia in 2025.

Drayk Bowen — LB — 6-2 — 232
Started all 28 games the past two seasons while tallying 145 tackles, 8.5 tackles for loss, 4.5 sacks, 4 forced fumbles and 6 passes broken up; will likely remain a captain for a second season in 2026.

Cooper Flanagan — TE — 6-6 — 250
Started five games as a sophomore in 2024 before suffering an Achilles injury in the College Football Playoff quarterfinals; entered 2026 preseason camp as the favorite to win starting role despite playing in only one game last season.

Rico Flores Jr. — WR — 6-2 — 211
Transferred to UCLA after a 27-catch, 392-yard freshman season at Notre Dame; suffered a season-ending knee injury in 2024 after starting the first four games of the season; rebounded to make 26 catches for 274 yards last season, then transferred to Virginia.

Christian Gray — CB — 6-0 — 186
Started in all 25 games he played the past two seasons; started to train as a potential nickel back this spring, where he can become starter to make room for Colorado transfer DJ McKinney.

Jaden Greathouse — WR — 6-1 — 215
Failed to carry momentum from 2024 season, which included 13 catches for 233 yards and 3 touchdowns in the final two CFP games, due to hamstring issue that limited him to four games in 2025; could be a major X-factor at receiver this season.

Devan Houstan — OL — 6-4 — 305
Played in just three games in his first two seasons as a defensive lineman and matched that total in 2025 as a reserve offensive lineman; is expected to remain a depth piece in 2026.

Charles Jagusah — OL — 6-5 — 330
Suffered a serious arm injury during the 2025 offseason that continued to keep his future uncertain this summer; can become an impact starter if healthy, as he proved in limited opportunities as a freshman and sophomore.

Braylon James — WR — 6-2 — 190
Transferred to TCU after catching 1 pass for 12 yards in four games as a freshman at Notre Dame; added 3 receptions in 2024 before missing the 2025 season with a wrist injury.

Jeremiyah Love — RB — 6-0 — 212
Dazzled in two seasons as a starting running back for Notre Dame, which ended as a Heisman Trophy finalist in 2025; selected third overall by the Arizona Cardinals in the 2026 NFL Draft.

Kenny Minchey — QB — 6-2 — 211
Lost the starting quarterback competition to CJ Carr last preseason; transferred to Kentucky after a brief commitment to Nebraska; expected to start for the Wildcats in 2026.

Ben Minich — DB — 6-0 — 197
Played primarily on special teams in 29 games across three seasons at Notre Dame; transferred to Miami (Ohio) with chance to become a starter.

Armel Mukam — DT — 6-3 — 296
Spent first three seasons at Notre Dame as a deep reserve; returned to Irish after exploring transfer portal options; will fight to break into defensive line rotation.

Joe Otting — OL — 6-4 — 305
Made first six career starts after center Ashton Craig suffered a season-ending knee injury against NC State last season; should remain starter until Craig returns to full health.

Sam Pendleton — OL — 6-4 — 315
Started seven games at left guard for Notre Dame in 2024 before losing his job; transferred to Tennessee and became starting center for all 13 games last season.

Adon Shuler — S — 6-0 — 202
Became a captain in 2025 after starting all 16 games as a sophomore in 2024; Amassed 112 tackles, 6 tackles for loss, 5 interceptions, 3 forced fumbles and 10 passes broken up the past two seasons; will remain a key piece in the Irish secondary.

KK Smith — WR — 6-0 — 180
Transferred to Michigan State this offseason after failing to find consistent role in Notre Dame's rotation; logged career highs in receptions (8), receiving yards (123) and receiving touchdowns (2) last season.

Chris Terek — OL — 6-5 — 321
Played in 26 games primarily as a blocker on the field goal/extra point units; likely will remain in reserve role as an interior lineman.

Boubacar Traore — DE — 6-5 — 253
Showed potential in 2024 with 3 sacks and 5 tackles for loss in five games before season-ending knee injury; expanded his production with team-leading 6.5 sacks and 10 tackles for loss in 11 games; still has room to elevate as Notre Dame's most important defensive lineman.

Brenan Vernon — DT — 6-5 — 300
Made four appearances in first two seasons but didn't see game action in 2025; stepped into role as scout team offensive lineman when Irish needed bodies; medically retired from football this offseason.

Preston Zinter — TE — 6-2 — 254
Contributed to special teams in 30 games in three seasons but couldn't crack rotation in transition from linebacker to defensive end; transferred this offseason to play tight end at Rice.

BY ERIC HANSEN

Defensive end Rodney Dunham worked his way into the two-deep depth chart during spring practice and figures to be a strong rotational piece on the line as a freshman for the Irish.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

YOUTH MOVEMENT

Projecting the 2025 paths for all 30 freshmen

The NCAA's new 5-for-5 rule creates a temporary parallel universe for the next few years when it comes to calculating a college football player's years of eligibility, and changes the math in all kinds of ways for college coaches.

It also sends the term "redshirting" toward obsolescence.

Notre Dame fifth-year head coach Marcus Freeman sees all of this as a positive, including the flip side of the equation. That is, players like safety Luke Talich and defensive tackle Elijah Hughes, for instance, who were heading into their final college seasons, now have an option to return in 2027.

"It's good for both parties — the student-athlete, but also the coaches," Freeman said of the 5-for-5 rule during a sit-down with a small group of reporters in late July. "Coaches don't have to make a decision on what four games we are playing them [in].

"Do we want to save this fourth game in case we need them? We've got to have a tough conversation. We need you to play Game 5, and this kid is talking to his agent and his parents, 'They don't want me to play Game 5.' That's tough on a young person. It's tough on coaches.

"Now that young person doesn't have to worry about his parents saying, 'You can only play three games or four games — don't play another one.' I think it's really an added benefit for all parties. It's going to be, I think, something good moving forward."

Redshirting has been part of college football's vernacular since 1937, originating at Nebraska, but it only started to gain mass momentum universally after freshman eligibility was permanently restored by the NCAA in 1972. In 2018, players seeking non-medical redshirts were allowed to play in up to four games and still reach that goal.

Previously, one snap in one game was enough to burn through a potential redshirt year. In 2024, the rule was amended to exclude postseason games from the four-game limit. Thus, a freshman in the 12-team College Football Playoff could conceivably play up to eight games total.

All players on the current Irish roster have the option of using the old rules or the new age-based rules, whichever is more beneficial from an eligibility standpoint. The 2027 recruiting class will be the first fully subject to the 5-for-5 rule — which essentially means a five-year window to play five years of football, with very minimal and rare exceptions to recoup a missed year. And now, with redshirting no longer a viable option, conceivably all 30 of Notre Dame's freshmen could see action in 2026. But the volume of those expected to make an immediate impact has been tamped down in recent years

by the use of the transfer portal to fill obvious holes, and — starting last season — expanded scholarship numbers doing the same.

Just four Irish freshmen played in enough games in 2025 to be ineligible for a redshirt season — linebacker Madden Faraimo, cornerbacks Mark Zackery IV and Dallas Golden, and kicker Erik Schmidt.

Still, some in Notre Dame's current freshman class are in play to earn significant roles in the season ahead, but most still would benefit from back-burner maturation. Some land in the gray area in between. For fun, we've included in parentheses the recruiting ranking out of 30 for each freshman within the class.

Here's the breakdown of how their playing time is likely to play out this season:

CLEAR PATH AND THE TALENT TO MAKE IT HAPPEN

• **Punter Jasper Scaife (29):** The 21-year-old Australian import is the only freshman in the class on a trajectory to be a starter. His primary competition is sophomore Erik Schmidt, who was Notre Dame's main kickoff man most of the 2025 season and injury replacement placekicker in the second half of it.

• **Defensive end Rodney Dunham (1):** The 6-foot-4, 242-pound former five-star prospect worked his way into the two-deep depth chart during spring practice and figures to be a strong rotational piece behind Notre Dame's 2025 sack leader, Boubacar Traore.

• **Tight end Ian Premer (2):** He was one of only five members of the freshman class who didn't enroll early in January, but rather in June. But Premer made an immediate strong first impression in June OTAs.

Redshirt junior Cooper Flanagan and redshirt freshman James Flanigan figure to be tight ends "1 and 1A" in a core group of three that will get regular use. Premer is the heavy favorite to grab that third spot in 2026, and someday evolve into a starter and then a star.

TWISTED PATH, BUT PERHAPS A MID- TO LATE-SEASON EMERGENCE

• **Quarterbacks Teddy Jarrard (15) and Noah Grubbs (23):** These guys almost need their own category when it comes to their 2026 projections. Barring injury, this is about jostling for position when it comes to the No. 2 quarterback spot and, to some extent, getting the pole position to be starter CJ Carr's successor in 2027.

But as Freeman reiterated in July, the backup quarterback on Sept. 6 for the opener against Wisconsin in Green Bay, Wis., may not be the guy who is No. 2 in October or during Notre Dame's presumed playoff run or the 2027 frontrunner, should Carr — as expected — declare for the 2027 NFL Draft.

Both Jarrard, a June enrollee, and Grubbs, a spring practice participant, headed into August training camp likely to leapfrog redshirt freshman Blake Hebert during the month.

• **Running backs Jonaz Walton (7) and Javian Osborne (8):** Running backs coach Ja'Juan Seider is open to going as deep as four on game days in the five-man running back room, but he stuck with a two-man rotation of fellow All-Americans Jeremiyah Love and Jadarian Price in 2025.

The magic number in 2026, with Love and Price off to the NFL, likely will end up being three, with Walton and Osborne having the longest odds to be included. Walton did get plenty of exposure via practice reps in the spring, when Kedren Young was held out in the late stages of his ACL recovery, projected starter Aneyas Williams had some contact limitations, and Osborne was sidelined by wrist surgery.

That left redshirt freshman Nolan James Jr. and Walton to get most of the spring work, along with some walk-ons, two of whom migrated from the Irish rugby team. Walton and Osborne could also both carve out prominent special teams roles if they can't crack the Williams-James-Young rotation.

• **Wide receiver Bubba Frazier (18):** Frazier is another strong special teams candidate who has the elite raw speed to make a move up the depth chart. But he runs into a tough numbers game unless an injury opens a door this season.

• **Defensive end Ebenezer Ewetade (6):** The 6-4, 240-pounder made strong weight/strength gains in winter conditioning, and he flashed those on the field during the final week of spring practice. Had the Irish not added Keon Keeley through the transfer portal in January, Ewetade's path to significant playing time would be a little clearer.

As it stands, he could make a case for the defensive end rotation to go three deep with his play in training camp and early in the season.

• **Safety Joey O'Brien (4):** O'Brien figures to have some kind of rotational role in what might be the best safeties room in the country, but how large? Brauntae Johnson and Adon Shuler, the starters, have All-America potential and experience to go with it. Senior Luke Talich would be a starter on most teams. And then redshirt freshman Ethan Long was Notre Dame's highest-graded defender, per Pro Football Focus, though in a small sample size.

Still, the 6-5, 203-pound former five-star has that aura of "too good to sit."

• **Cornerbacks Khary Adams (3) and Ayden Pouncey (5):** Ditto for these two cornerbacks, who might have been in the mix to be starters as freshmen in the years before former defensive backs coach Mike Mickens supercharged recruiting in the Irish secondary.

There's potential to contribute in defensive niche packages and on special teams, and they have the talent to step in in case of injury or to save some wear and tear on All-American Leonard Moore and projected field corner starter DJ McKinney in runaway wins.

AHEAD OF THE DEVELOPMENT CURVE, BUT NO CLEAR OPPORTUNITY

• **Offensive tackle Grayson McKeogh (9):** Could battle for a spot on the two-deep depth chart, but still not close to regular duty in 2026.

• **Wide receivers Kaydon Finley (11) and Devin Fitzgerald (16):** In earlier Irish rosters, these guys would be competing to start. Both have the potential to move up the depth chart, but are battling numbers.

LONGER-TERM DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

• **Defensive tackle Elijah Golden (10):** Transfer acquisitions Francis Brewu and Tionne Gray make the climb in 2026 much steeper.

• **Offensive tackle Greg Patrick (12):** Will train at tackle and center in 2026 with an eventual shift to guard coming later.

• **Offensive guard Ben Nichols (13):** Could end up in the two-deep late in the season, but more likely not before 2027.

• **Offensive guard Tyler Merrill (14):** Same script as Nichols but maybe a little further behind at the moment.

• **Cornerback Chaz Smith (17):** Portal additions McKinney and Jayden Sanders moved Smith to the back burner.

• **Linebacker Thomas Davis Jr. (19):** Will battle for playing time in 2027 once the linebacker corps likely has a big personnel turnover.

• **Offensive tackle Charlie Thom (20):** Cross-training at guard and tackle.

• **Tight end Preston Fryzel (21):** Not yet tight end-sized (6-4, 225 heading into summer), but outstanding speed and skill gives him an intriguing future.

• **Wide receiver Brayden Robinson (22):** Coming off an ACL tear suffered in high school, the 5-7, 168-pound slot receiver has been cleared medically but has lots of catching up to do in terms of physical development.

• **Defensive tackle Tiki Hola (24):** Like Robinson, coming back from a high school ACL tear, cleared for camp and no pressure to rush his way into action.

• **Linebacker Ja'Kobe Clapper (25):** Like Davis, part of the next wave of Irish linebackers but nowhere near the playing rotation in 2026.

• **Center Sullivan Garvin (26):** Impressed the coaches with his initial audition at center in the spring.

• **Nickel back Nick Reddish (27):** Back from March shoulder surgery, expected to provide depth at the nickel position.

• **Wide receiver Dylan Faison (28):** Focused on lacrosse in the spring and came on late in the season in that sport. At 6-2, 163 pounds, was the lightest player on the Irish roster heading into summer.

• **Kicker Micah Drescher (30):** The June enrollee appears to be the primary backup plan at kicker if an injury takes out Purdue transfer Spencer Porath, a junior. ✦

BY JACK SOBLE

Wisconsin head coach Luke Fickell is 17-21 in three seasons, including a 4-8 campaign in 2025.
PHOTO COURTESY WISCONSIN ATHLETICS

MAKE OR BREAK

Luke Fickell begins defining season at Wisconsin with trial by fire vs. Irish

To fully understand how bad things have become for Wisconsin under Luke Fickell, one must understand the number 42.

That number was the Badgers' offseason rallying cry in the months that preceded the 2025 season. It served as a reminder of their most humiliating moment of 2024: A 42-10 loss to Iowa, which occurred during a five-game losing streak that knocked them out of bowl eligibility for the first time since 2001. "Forty-two" became Wisconsin's version of Marcus Freeman's "leave no doubt" or "keep the pain," used as motivation to ensure it never happened again.

A year later, it happened again.

Iowa marched into Camp Randall Stadium — on homecoming, no less — and beat the Badgers 37-0. A matchup the team had circled on the calendar since January became yet another embarrassment. Chants of "Fire Fickell" rained down from the fans as early as the second quarter. The third-year head coach, on his way to a second straight season without a bowl game, was out of answers.

"That's as low as it can be," Fickell said. "I apologize. I apologize to our guys, to not be ready, to not have them ready. I'm dumbfounded in a lot of ways."

The next week, Ohio State entered Madison and left with a 34-0 victory. Later that evening, according to The Athletic, then-Wisconsin athletics director Chris McIntosh called Fickell into his office and asked him a question: "What do you want to do?"

Either Fickell could look for a way out or recommit himself to fixing the Badgers. He chose the latter, and in response, the university doubled down on its commitment to him.

With the money it would have used to buy Fickell out, Wisconsin reportedly invested more than $25 million into his roster. A prominent booster told The Athletic that he believed the Badgers' budget was in the bottom third of the Big Ten in 2025. For the 2026 season, the booster heard, it resides in the top half.

Entering Fickell's fourth year at the helm in Madison, his roster is indeed more talented than its previous iterations, with 33 new transfer additions. Wisconsin finished the cycle as On3's No. 14 portal class, just ahead of two marquee Notre Dame opponents in Miami (No. 16) and BYU (No. 17). It also plays a much more forgiving schedule, with one exception.

The Badgers open 2026 at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis., for a Sunday night matchup with Notre Dame. While a loss is expected and will not cripple its season, Wisconsin's showing against Fickell's former pupil could serve as a bellwether for things to come.

Freeman's boss from 2017-20 at Cincinnati has a fourth chance to turn the Badgers around. He may not get a fifth.

"I think for us in general, we know darn well where we've been the last couple years," Fickell said at Big Ten Media Days. "To have the focus of what it is going to be on Week 1, Sept. 6, not only that it's in Lambeau Field, I think it's helped me as a coach recognize some of the things we have to continue to evolve to be able to do."

COMPLETE OVERHAUL

Wisconsin's issues from the first three years of the Fickell era are well publicized.

The Badgers failed to embrace name, image and likeness (NIL) in ways that crippled the talent on the roster. They did not recruit their own state nearly as effectively as previous coaching staffs had done in the past. They also tried to change who they were offensively, which backfired on everyone involved.

Fickell's first offensive coordinator hire was Phil Longo, who tried to convert Wisconsin into an "Air Raid" team. That

went about as well as you might expect, and Longo was fired midway through the 2024 season. Fickell, who went 57-18 at Cincinnati and took the Bearcats to the four-team College Football Playoff, saw his first non-interim Power Four job go sideways at a shockingly rapid pace.

After a third unsuccessful fall, Wisconsin's winter, spring and summer had a clear theme: Everything has to change. Fickell acknowledged at Big Ten Media Days that his tenure has not gone according to plan, due to a wide variety of factors.

"It hasn't been there," Fickell said. "That's not just in the wins and losses, that's in a lot of other things as well: The way we play the game, the physicality, the toughness. We've got to do a hell of a lot better job at doing it, and I can promise you that we will.

"Things are obviously moving in that direction. An old coach of mine that I coached for, Coach [Urban] Meyer, used to say, 'Don't sleep on the game.' I always envisioned that 'don't sleep on the game' meant 'don't sleep on the schemes that are developing within the game,' because one day you wake up, and the game will pass you by.

"The truth of the matter is as I've realized more and more, that wasn't just in the schemes of the game, that was in all of the game. It evolved over the last three or four years. Recognizing the evolution of this game is really critical to what we're doing."

That includes NIL, the transfer portal and everything else your brain immediately turns to when you think of modern college football. But perhaps Fickell's biggest problem so far has been keeping his players healthy. Injuries have ravaged the Badgers, hitting the quarterback position especially hard. Fickell brought in a pair of transfers in Tyler Van Dyke (2024) and Billy Edwards Jr. (2025), and they played a combined five games for Wisconsin in two years.

Preventing that was one of Fickell's top offseason priorities, and he believes his staff has made the changes required to get through a 12-game season.

"We've had some critical injuries that have caused us some issues," Fickell said. "We've taken a hard look at the way we train, the way we practiced: spring ball, fall camp, how we'll practice as we get into the season. All things we have to recognize as a football staff and program that we've got to continue to evolve."

The emergence of linebacker Mason Posa, who finished his true freshman season with 61 tackles and 4 sacks, was one of the bright spots for the Badgers last season.

PHOTO COURTESY WISCONSIN ATHLETICS

TURNING TALK INTO ACTION

Shortly after announcing Fickell's return, Wisconsin provided its fans with a light at the end of the tunnel.

The Badgers played three ranked opponents in November and defeated two of them, first with a 13-10 win over Washington and later with a more convincing 27-10 victory over Illinois. It wasn't enough to save the 2025 campaign after a six-game losing streak, but it was hope, and arguably the two biggest catalysts returned for 2026.

That would be linebackers Mason Posa and Cooper Catalano, both of whom stepped up in the second half of the year when injuries hit their position group. As true freshmen, they com-

2026 WISCONSIN SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent (TV)	Time (ET)
Sept. 6	***vs. Notre Dame* (NBC)***	***7:30 p.m.***
Sept. 12	Western Illinois (BTN)	7:15 p.m.
Sept. 19	Eastern Michigan (Peacock)	12:30 p.m.
Sept. 26	at Penn State	TBA
Oct. 3	Michigan State	TBA
Oct. 17	at UCLA	TBA
Oct. 24	Southern Cal	TBA
Oct. 31	at Iowa	TBA
Nov. 7	Rutgers	TBA
Nov. 14	at Maryland	TBA
Nov. 21	at Purdue	TBA
Nov. 28	Minnesota (NBC)	7:30 p.m.

** at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis.*

2026 NOTRE DAME SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent (TV)	Time (ET)
Sept. 6	***vs. Wisconsin* (NBC)***	***7:30 p.m.***
Sept. 12	Rice (NBC)	3:30 p.m.
Sept. 19	Michigan State (NBC)	7:30 p.m.
Sept. 26	at Purdue	TBA
Oct. 3	at North Carolina	TBA
Oct. 10	Stanford (NBC)	3:30 p.m.
Oct. 17	at BYU	TBA
Oct. 31	vs. Navy^ (ABC/ESPN)	12 p.m.
Nov. 7	Miami (NBC)	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 14	Boston College (NBC)	3:30 p.m.
Nov. 21	SMU (NBC)	7:30 p.m.
Nov. 28	at Syracuse	TBA

** at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis.*
^ at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass.

Facts & Figures

NOTRE DAME VS. WISCONSIN

Date: Sept. 6, 2026
Site (Capacity): Lambeau Field (81,441)
Kickoff: 7:30 p.m. ET
Television: NBC
Radio: This game can be heard on Notre Dame IMG affiliates.
Series Facts: Notre Dame leads the all-time series 9-6-2. The Irish last defeated the Badgers 41-13 in 2021 at Soldier Field in Chicago, which was their first matchup since 1964.
Head coaches: Wisconsin — Luke Fickell (17-21, 4th season); Notre Dame — Marcus Freeman (43-12, 5th season).
Noting Wisconsin: The Badgers did not have a player drafted in 2026, their first year without a selection since 1978 ... Second-year offensive coordinator Jeff Grimes will attempt to improve the No. 133 scoring (12.8 points per game) and total (253.2 yards per game) offense in the country ... Of the Badgers' 33 transfer additions, only one (running back Abu Sama III) carries a four-star rating ... Expect several tailbacks to get looks behind Sama, including former Southern Cal backup Bryan Jackson ... Colton Joseph's 1,007 rushing yards last season at Old Dominion ranked fifth among all FBS quarterbacks ... Aside from Mason Posa and Cooper Catalano, Wisconsin's only returning starter on defense is reliable safety Matthew Jung.

bined for 30 tackles, 3.5 sacks, 4.5 tackles for loss and a fumble recovery in the Washington game alone.

Beyond the numbers, though, they injected some much-needed life into Fickell's program.

"Some of our youth stepped up and played well, and it meshed with some of the veterans," Fickell told The Athletic. "We've had great kids, a good culture. But we needed more of a chip on our shoulder. Now we have some edge to our leadership, some possible alphas."

Thanks to the transfer portal, the Badgers added several more alphas throughout the offseason.

No addition was more significant than former Old Dominion quarterback Colton Joseph, a dual-threat signal-caller whose athleticism and arm strength make him an explosive play waiting to happen. Two starting offensive linemen and a tough running back in Iowa State's Abu Sama III were brought in to fix the run game, which finished 127th nationally in yards per carry last season. Veteran defensive backs Javan Robinson (Arizona State) and Marvin Burks Jr. (Missouri) will look to engineer a bounce-back season in the secondary.

"I know this: There's a different vibe within our program, and I think it has so much to do with leadership," Fickell said. "How good are we? Where will we be? We've got a lot of new faces that have come in here, but the great thing is they've come in to be a part of us."

But at this point in Fickell's tenure, Wisconsin fans need to see his words backed up with actions. Badgernotes.com's Dillon Graff put it best: "If Fickell's first three seasons in Madison have taught us anything, it's that Wisconsin's leadership has consistently sounded a hell of a lot stronger in July than it has looked in October and November."

Until the current regime proves otherwise, talk is cheap. Fickell and company fully understand that without results, their days are numbered. Producing them starts with an effort against the Irish that makes Badger faithful think, "You know what? There might be something here."

"I wanted the guys to understand that, too. My chips are pushed to the middle," Fickell told The Athletic. "We've got to burn the ships, burn the excuses, anything that's going to hold us back. The only option is to push forward." ✦

THREE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT WISCONSIN

1. Diverging Paths Of Fickell And Freeman

Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman and Wisconsin head coach Luke Fickell know each other well. When Freeman played linebacker at Ohio State (2004-08), Fickell was his position coach for the Buckeyes. Then when Fickell became the head coach at Cincinnati prior to the 2017 season, he hired Freeman as his defensive coordinator and linebackers coach.

Freeman remained on Fickell's staff until he was hired as Notre Dame's defensive coordinator in 2021. That certainly changed the trajectory of Freeman's career, and it may have impacted the decision Fickell faced following the 2021 season, too.

When head coach Brian Kelly suddenly departed to LSU in November, Notre Dame opted to expedite its coaching search and promote Freeman to head coach rather than wait out other options who were still coaching. One of those options could have been Fickell, who stuck with Cincinnati to coach in the 2021 College Football Playoff before eventually leaving to take the Wisconsin job after the 2022 season.

Notre Dame and Wisconsin have proceeded in opposite directions since then. While Freeman has become one of the hottest names in coaching, Fickell is sitting on one of the hottest seats in the country after a 4-8 season that included back-to-back shutout losses for the first time at Wisconsin since 1977.

Fickell could really use an upset victory over Notre Dame to jumpstart the 2026 season. Meanwhile, Freeman just wants to avoid a slow September on a run toward the College Football Playoff.

Colton Joseph transferred to Wisconsin from Old Dominion, where he was tabbed as the 2025 Sun Belt Offensive Player of the Year after compiling 3,631 yards of total offense and 34 touchdowns.

PHOTO COURTESY WISCONSIN ATHLETICS

2. Finally A Quarterback Answer?

Injuries ravaged Wisconsin's starting quarterback position in the past two seasons. Miami transfer Tyler Van Dyke started the first three games in 2024 before suffering a season-ending injury. Billy Edwards Jr. didn't make it out of September of the 2025 season before suffering a season-ending injury, which resulted in the Badgers starting four different quarterbacks last season.

Wisconsin brought in Old Dominion transfer Colton Joseph this offseason to help solve its quarterback woes. Joseph, the 2025 Sun Belt Offensive Player of the Year, started 20 games the past two seasons at Old Dominion, threw for 4,251 yards, 32 touchdowns and 15 interceptions with a 59.8 percent completion rate, and rushed 272 times for 1,654 yards and 24 touchdowns.

Perhaps that much rushing at Wisconsin could leave Joseph susceptible to injury. The Badgers hope it doesn't while working to improve around him. They have plenty of question marks on the offensive line and at wide receiver.

3. Proven Production At Linebacker

No position on Wisconsin's roster may have a brighter outlook heading into the season than linebacker. The Badgers lost linebacker Christian Alliegro to Ohio State via the transfer portal, but a pair of sophomores — Mason Posa and Cooper Catalano — returned after breakout freshman seasons.

Posa led the Badgers with 61 tackles, and Catalano finished second with 56. The duo combined for 8.5 tackles for loss, 6 sacks and 4 passes broken up. They're expected to take on bigger roles this season and could wreck the game plans of opposing coordinators.

— Tyler James

On Paper

BY JACK SOBLE

WISCONSIN RUNNING GAME VS. NOTRE DAME RUN DEFENSE

Notre Dame tied national champion Indiana for 10th in rush efficiency defense last year, allowing just 2.99 yards per carry. *Blue & Gold Illustrated* expects the Irish to be just as good or better in 2026, but they begin the season with a tougher test than you might think.

Wisconsin, a program that prides itself on running the ball, tied with Boston College for 127th nationally in yards per carry with 3.31 in 2025. Head coach Luke Fickell and company put significant resources into fixing that, acquiring two starting offensive linemen, a No. 1 running back and a dual-threat quarterback from the transfer portal. The quarterback, Colton Joseph, is the key to the operation.

In two seasons at Old Dominion, Joseph ran 272 times for 1,654 yards and 24 touchdowns. He's one of just four returning quarterbacks who broke the 1,000-yard threshold in 2025. Is he athletic enough to handle the step up in competition? Well, against Indiana last year, he ran for touchdowns of 75 and 78 yards. Fail to account for him on zone reads and you will pay, because once he reaches the open field, it's difficult to stop him.

The running back, former Iowa State No. 2 back Abu Sama III, is less of a big-play threat but will help the Badgers keep the chains moving. Sama's elusiveness rating (an advanced PFF stat designed to measure rushing performance independent of blocking) ranked 12th among Power Four running backs.

Sama and Joseph should form a dangerous tandem. The question is, can Wisconsin block? There's some promise in an offensive line that returns both starters at guard — both of whom were redshirt freshmen in 2025 — and the return of left tackle Kevin Heywood, who would have started as a true sophomore last year but suffered a season-ending injury. Center Austin Kawecki started at Oklahoma State last year and adds veteran leadership to the operation.

This is the matchup that should concern the Irish the most, especially because its best run defender, Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa, might be out as he recovers from a torn ACL. If he plays, odds are he's on a strict pitch count. The Irish know this and will stack the box, but that won't help them if Joseph gets loose.

But given how good the run defense was in 2025, the returning contributors with experience against run-first quarterbacks and the upgrades at defensive tackle — expect a great deal of Pitt transfer Francis Brewu and Oregon transfer Tionne Gray — Notre Dame should handle business.

Advantage: Notre Dame

Senior running back Abu Sama III rushed for 732 yards and 5 touchdowns while averaging 5.2 yards per carry as the backup at Iowa State last season.

PHOTO COURTESY WISCONSIN ATHLETICS

WISCONSIN PASSING GAME VS. NOTRE DAME PASS DEFENSE

About that Indiana game mentioned earlier. Joseph ran 10 times for 179 yards and 2 touchdowns against the eventual national champions. He also completed 11 of 22 throws for 96 yards with 3 of his 10 interceptions on the season.

The transition from the Sun Belt to the Big Ten will be Joseph's biggest challenge this season, and Wisconsin's schedule throws him directly into the buzzsaw that is Notre Dame's secondary.

Joseph's 2025 stat line shows a sub-60 completion percentage and 9.0 yards per attempt. That's a clear indication that he likes to chuck it deep, and sure enough, Joseph's average depth of target of 13.3 yards led all qualified quarterbacks in college football. Generally speaking, that's not a bad way to live if you're a middling Big Ten team that needs explosive plays. It is an extremely bad way to live against a secondary that led the Power Four in interceptions per game with 1.75.

Led by cornerback Leonard Moore (5) and safety Brauntae Johnson (4), the Irish return those responsible for 19 of their 21 picks from a year ago.

To make matters worse, Joseph is unlikely to find many open receivers against Notre Dame. While a disastrous quarterback situation certainly didn't help, Wisconsin's top three returning wide receivers combined for 244 yards last year.

Eugene Hilton Jr. had 91 of those yards as a true freshman, and he's a name to watch. Otherwise, Joseph is counting on transfers like Shemar Rigby (351 yards at Oklahoma State) and Jaylon Domingeaux (857 yards at Southeast Louisiana) to get open against the likes of Moore, Christian Gray and Colorado transfer DJ McKinney.

Particularly if the Irish force the Badgers into situations where they know they're passing, this could get ugly.

Advantage: Notre Dame

NOTRE DAME RUNNING GAME VS. WISCONSIN RUN DEFENSE

Run defense was Wisconsin's only true strength a year ago. The Badgers finished 18th in opponent yards per carry at 3.40. Enough playmakers returned that if Notre Dame has any problems on its offensive line, Wisconsin should be able to expose them.

The conversation has to start at inside linebacker, where Mason Posa and Cooper Catalano starred as true freshmen after the Badgers dealt with injuries ahead of them on the depth chart. Posa was a Freshman All-American who made third-team All-Big Ten and earned an 85.7 PFF run defense grade in 2025.

Posa and Catalano were Wisconsin's two leading tacklers. They finished with 61 and 56, respectively, and combined for 8.5 tackles for loss. Logic dictates they're in for breakout sophomore seasons on a national scale, *if* they get enough help up front.

The Badgers' defensive line is a combination of solid rotational players getting their shot at a

Last season, middle linebacker Cooper Catalano started for Wisconsin as a true freshman and finished second on the team in tackles with 56.
PHOTO COURTESY WISCONSIN ATHLETICS

WISCONSIN TWO-DEEP DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
WR-X	13	Eugene Hilton Jr.	6-2	204	So.
	9	Jaylon Domingeaux	6-3	211	Sr.
WR-SL	0	Tyrell Henry	6-0	184	Sr.
	12	Zion Kearney	6-3	210	Jr.
LT	71	PJ Wilkins	6-6	335	R-Jr.
	72	Lucas Simmons-Johansson	6-7	323	R-Jr.
LG	78	Colin Cubberly	6-6	325	R-So.
	73	Blake Cherry	6-5	310	So.
C	51	Austin Kawecki	6-4	310	Gr.
	50	Ryan Cory	6-4	310	R-So.
RG	75	Emerson Mandell	6-5	325	R-So.
	60	Nolan Davenport	6-6	308	R-Fr.
RT	55	Kevin Heywood	6-9	320	R-So.
	70	Barrett Nelson	6-6	308	R-Sr.
TE	89	Jacob Harris	6-6	265	R-Jr.
	85	Grant Stec	6-6	258	R-So.
WR-Z	2	Chris Brooks Jr.	6-2	224	R-Sr.
	7	Sharmar Rigby	6-4	198	Jr.
QB	1	Colton Joseph	6-2	215	R-Jr.
	8	Deuce Adams	6-2	207	R-So.
RB	3	Abu Sama III	5-11	211	Sr.
	6	Darrion Dupree	5-11	218	Jr.

DEFENSE

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
LOLB	15	Sebastian Cheeks	6-3	243	Gr.
	0	Justus Boone	6-5	278	R-Sr.
NT	91	Hammond Russell IV	6-4	320	R-Sr.
	95	Jacob Anderson	6-4	305	Gr.
DT	97	Junior Poyser	6-2	331	R-Jr.
	30	Charles Perkins	6-2	333	R-Sr.
ROLB	7	Tyreese Fearbry	6-4	255	R-Sr.
	12	Nicholas Clayton	6-5	247	So.
WLB	8	Mason Posa	6-3	235	So.
	59	Aaron Witt	6-6	241	Gr.
MLB	44	Cooper Catalano	6-1	232	So.
	43	Taylor Schaefer	6-3	242	Jr.
SLB	28	Jon Kamara	6-4	243	R-So.
	19	Thomas Heiberger	6-4	230	R-So.
LCB	2	Javan Robinson	5-11	184	R-Sr.
	24	Jai'mier Scott	6-1	192	R-Fr.
SS	29	Matthew Jung	6-3	213	R-Sr.
	16	Grant Dean	6-1	200	So.
FS	4	Marvin Burks Jr.	6-2	210	Sr.
	11	Carson Van Dinter	6-2	207	R-So.
RCB	1	Eric Fletcher Jr.	6-1	193	R-So.
	3	Cai Bates	6-3	200	R-So.
NB	5	Bryce West	5-11	200	R-So.
	27	Raphael Dunn	6-4	220	R-So.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
PK	97	Gavin Lahm	6-1	218	Gr.
	91	Sean West	6-2	205	R-So.
KO	97	Gavin Lahm	6-1	218	Gr.
	91	Sean West	6-2	205	R-So.
P	98	Ethan Tranel	6-1	225	R-Jr.
	91	Sean West	6-2	205	R-So

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
LS	46	James Roe	6-0	219	Jr.
	48	Andrew Goodman	5-11	223	R-Sr.
H	98	Ethan Tranel	6-1	225	R-Jr.
	91	Sean West	6-2	205	R-So.
PR	0	Tyrell Henry	6-0	184	Sr.
KR	13	Eugene Hilton Jr.	6-2	204	So.

larger role and legitimate question marks. Edge rushers comprise the former; Sebastian Cheeks is an experienced edge setter, while Tyrese Fearbry had 7 run stops in just 32 run defense snaps last year. The concern is on the interior, where Charles Perkins (who made his name at UT Martin before playing sparingly last year) and West Virginia transfer Hammond Russel IV are the projected starters.

That's not a bad group on its surface, but it's not as toothsome as the one that came before it.

This is a big game for Notre Dame left guard Anthonie Knapp and center Ashton Craig (if he plays), who should be able to move people at Lambeau Field. The same goes for behemoth tackles Guerby Lambert and Will Black. Can they keep Catalano and Posa away from running back Aneyas Williams enough to power a successful rushing attack?

We shall see.

Advantage: Even

NOTRE DAME PASSING GAME VS. WISCONSIN PASS DEFENSE

Wisconsin took a blowtorch to its 2025 secondary, whose ineptitude led to the 120th-ranked pass efficiency defense in college football. Three transfer additions are projected starters, and they're led by a new position coach in Robert Steeples (who coached Gray in high school).

One of Steeples' first decisions in Madison, Wis., was elevating cornerback Jai'mier Scott — who didn't play a single snap as a freshman — to the starting lineup. That says a lot about Scott's talent, but if he finds himself on the field side, you can expect Notre Dame quarterback CJ Carr to target wideout Jordan Faison early and often.

As for the transfers, the two key names to know are cornerback Javan Robinson (Arizona State) and safety Marvin Burks Jr. (Missouri). They were both full-time starters at Power Four schools last season, and they join returning starter Matthew Jung to form one of the most experienced defensive backfields the Irish will face.

The power of wily veteran leadership, however, is probably not stopping Carr this season. If he plays like Notre Dame expects, he could wind up packing his bags for New York in December.

Carr is an elite pocket passer, and the No. 1 way to slow down elite pocket passers is pressuring them with a four-man rush. The Badgers have some options, most notably Cheeks (27 pressures last season), whose experience will test Black and Lambert.

The X-Factor here is Posa, who had 4 sacks and 2 forced fumbles as a freshman. Much like Viliamu-Asa, the 6-foot-3 Posa is tall and bendy enough to thrive as a sub-package edge rusher. You can bet Wisconsin will move him all over the place to put him in position to attack Carr, but as long as he's contained, the Irish should have little issue throwing on the Badgers.

Advantage: Notre Dame

SPECIAL TEAMS

During spring practice, Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman said Purdue transfer Spencer Porath had been "as consistent as any kicker we've had." That's good news for the Irish, who experienced unmitigated disaster on extra points and field goals last season.

Porath connected on 15 of 17 field goals and 24 of 24 extra points as a sophomore, with a long of 53. Contrast that to projected Wisconsin kicker Gavin Lahm, who has never attempted a field goal or extra point in four years of college football, and you can see why the Irish have the kicking advantage (Lahm was the Badgers' kickoff specialist from 2022-24 and redshirted in 2025).

Neither side has a proven punter, though the Irish are high on Australian import Jasper Scaife's ceiling, or a standout kickoff or punt returner. The presence of Porath and its penchant for trickery is all Notre Dame needs.

Advantage: Notre Dame

COACHING

Freeman built his staff at Notre Dame in no small part by raiding Fickell's at Wisconsin. Quarterbacks coach Gino Guidugli and wide receivers coach Mike Brown both worked for Fickell at Cincinnati and followed him to Wisconsin, only to be poached by Freeman's Irish a short time later. Offensive coordinator Mike Denbrock was also on that staff, though he opted to follow Brian Kelly to LSU after its disillusion.

Additionally, while he never worked with Fickell, offensive line coach Joe Rudolph is a lifelong Badger. He played for Wisconsin from 1991-94 and coached there from 2008-11 and 2015-21.

The point here is, there are several assistants Fickell would love to work for him but instead work for Freeman.

The two last worked at Cincinnati together in 2020. Freeman left for Notre Dame in 2021 and became head coach in 2022, while Fickell joined Wisconsin in 2023. Since then, their tenures have taken wildly different paths. Fickell is 17-21 with the Badgers, faced "Fire Fickell" chants at Camp Randall Stadium and may be coaching for his job this season. Freeman, meanwhile, is 43-12 and practically bulletproof.

Fickell has dealt with horrible injury luck at Wisconsin, especially at the quarterback position. But

NOTRE DAME TWO-DEEP DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
WR	0	Quincy Porter	6-4	207	So.
	14	Micah Gilbert	6-2	205	R-So.
WR	3	Mylan Graham	6-1	192	R-So.
or	1	Jaden Greathouse	6-1	215	R-Jr.
LT	74	Will Black	6-7	316	R-Fr.
	71	Styles Prescod	6-6	298	R-So.
LG	54	Anthonie Knapp	6-5	304	Jr.
	55	Chris Terek	6-5	321	R-Jr.
C	70	Ashton Craig	6-5	310	R-Sr.
	64	Joe Otting	6-4	305	R-Jr.
RG	75	Sullivan Absher	6-7	320	R-Jr.
or	58	Matty Augustine	6-8	310	R-Fr.
RT	76	Guerby Lambert	6-7	325	R-So.
	58	Matty Augustine	6-8	310	R-Fr.
TE	87	Cooper Flanagan	6-6	250	R-Jr.
	88	James Flanigan	6-6	251	R-Fr.
or	7	Ty Washington	6-4	253	R-Sr.
WR	6	Jordan Faison	5-11	185	Sr.
	17	Elijah Burress	6-1	190	R-Fr.
QB	13	CJ Carr	6-2	215	R-So.
	12	Blake Hebert	6-2	216	R-Fr.
or	10	Noah Grubbs	6-4	209	Fr.
RB	22	Aneyas Williams	5-10	210	Jr.
	2	Nolan James Jr.	5-10	212	R-Fr.
or	21	Kedren Young	5-11	234	R-So.

DEFENSE

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
LDE	95	Bryce Young	6-6	260	Jr.
	11	Keon Keeley	6-5	275	R-Jr.
DT	47	Jason Onye	6-5	295	R-Sr.
	88	Armel Mukam	6-3	296	R-Jr.
or	56	Elijah Hughes	6-3	295	Sr.
NT	7	Francis Brewu	6-1	285	Jr.
	0	Tionne Gray	6-5	330	R-So.
RDE	5	Boubacar Traore	6-5	253	R-Jr.
	44	Rodney Dunham	6-4	242	Fr.
MLB	34	Drayk Bowen	6-2	232	Sr.
	27	Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa	6-3	230	Jr.
WLB	4	Jaiden Ausberry	6-1	226	R-Jr.
	3	Jaylen Sneed	6-1	227	R-Sr.
BCB	15	Leonard Moore	6-2	197	Jr./2
	12	Jayden Sanders	6-0	195	So./3
FCB	2	DJ McKinney	6-1	185	R-Sr.
	24	Mark Zackery IV	5-10	184	So.
NB	29	Christian Gray	6-0	186	Sr.
	1	Dallas Golden	6-0	191	So.
BS	8	Adon Shuler	6-0	202	R-Jr.
	28	Luke Talich	6-4	204	Sr.
FS	9	Tae Johnson	6-2	200	R-So.
	22	Ethan Long	6-2	204	R-Fr.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
PK	35	Spencer Porath	6-0	200	Jr.
	36	Micah Drescher	6-5	196	Fr.
KO	18	Erik Schmidt	6-2	211	So.
P	39	Jasper Scaife	6-6	215	Fr.
or	18	Erik Schmidt	6-2	211	So.
LS	96	Joseph Vinci	6-4	231	So.
	49	Andrew Kros	6-4	227	Jr.

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
H	39	Jasper Scaife	6-6	215	Fr.
PR	6	Jordan Faison	5-11	185	Sr.
	3	Mylan Graham	6-1	192	R-So.
KR	22	Aneyas Williams	5-10	210	Jr.
	2	Nolan James Jr.	5-10	212	R-Fr.

he's also made some significant mistakes, such as failing to embrace paying players and trying to install the Air Raid at Wisconsin, a school that for decades has thrived on ground-and-pound football. The Athletic wrote that Fickell's Badgers suffered from "a glaring lack of identity," which is the most damning phrase of all.

It is also something no one can say about Freeman's Irish. Since he took over, Notre Dame has gotten faster, tougher and more physical in all facets of the game. It has managed to modernize itself without abandoning what made it a national power in the first place.

Fickell still has a chance to turn things around, and his 57-18 tenure at Cincinnati still allows Wisconsin fans to hang onto hope. But 2022 is a long time ago, and there's no question who holds the coaching edge since then.

Advantage: Notre Dame

INTANGIBLES

Poor Wisconsin. The new-look roster is somewhat promising, and its schedule gets much easier from here, but Notre Dame is just about the worst Week 1 matchup the Badgers could have drawn.

In addition to the reasons you've already read, the Irish will be looking to make a point. This is their first game since the College Football Playoff Selection Committee dropped them out of the 12-team field at the last second. In the ensuing weeks, they adopted "leave no doubt" as their semi-official slogan. This is their first chance to prove they intend to do that on a national stage.

Redshirt senior safety Matthew Jung started eight of the Badgers' 12 games last season and ranked fifth on the team with 50 tackles.

PHOTO COURTESY WISCONSIN ATHLETICS

In other words, it is in Notre Dame's best interest to absolutely clobber Wisconsin. And Freeman, despite admiring Fickell as a friend and mentor, might also have some added motivation to show up his former boss.

There is also the continuity advantage. Notre Dame is first in the country in ESPN's returning production rankings at 72 percent. The formula factors transfer additions, but the vast majority of that comes from stars who have played together for years. Wisconsin is 35th at 59 percent, but its roster is heavily reliant on transfers who will need time to jell.

In this writer's opinion, the Badgers are a better team than this game will make them look. Unfortunately for them, the Irish have waited all year for Sunday night.

Advantage: Notre Dame

Staff Predictions

Todd D. Burlage: Notre Dame 35, Wisconsin 6

Wisconsin didn't gain much preseason respect entering its fifth season under Luke Fickell, the Badgers head coach who's widely considered on the hottest of hot seats in Madison. The Badgers went 4-8 last season, a poor record that included a six-game losing streak.

The Wisconsin defense was solid, finishing 24th nationally in fewest yards allowed per game (323.5). Its offense was horrible, finishing 133rd out of 134 teams in scoring at 12.8 points a game. Every matchup in this game favors Notre Dame, and the final score will show why.

Steve Downey: Notre Dame 30, Wisconsin 3

If the Fighting Irish are to "leave no doubt" in 2026, it begins by being ready to go out of the gates. In head coach Marcus Freeman's first four seasons, Notre Dame was just 3-5 in Games 1 and 2 of each season. Yes, three of those losses came against ranked foes Ohio State, Miami and Texas A&M, but they also dropped eminently winnable home games against inferior opponents Marshall and Northern Illinois.

The Badgers should be much improved after offseason roster churn resulted in 23 outgoing and 33 incoming transfers, but their talent level is no match for the Irish's. Notre Dame may have some kinks to work out with its offensive line and running game, but should still win this one without breaking much of a sweat.

Eric Hansen: Notre Dame 30, Wisconsin 10

The Badgers' better-than-average defense, aggressive transfer portal shopping to boost the offense, and the heavy familiarity between coaching staffs should all help Wisconsin (4-8 in 2025) keep things close for a half.

But Notre Dame's "Leave No Doubt" mantra comes to life after intermission, and the Irish improve to 13-0 all time in Shamrock Series matchups. In a game shuffled six years into the future because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Green Bay native James Flanigan, a redshirt freshman tight end, scores his first career TD on his first career reception, with family and friends taking it all in at iconic Lambeau Field.

Tyler James: Notre Dame 38, Wisconsin 13

All the talk about Notre Dame leaving no doubt ends when the Irish enter Lambeau Field. The talk will be replaced by actions, and the Wisconsin Badgers have the unfortunate position of being first on Notre Dame's to-do list. It might be a do-or-die season for head coach Luke Fickell at Wisconsin, but Notre Dame is even more desperate to prove it was slighted by the College Football Playoff committee last season.

Notre Dame should come out firing on all cylinders even with an offense featuring a lot of new faces at the skill positions. The weapons around junior quarterback CJ Carr will prove to be ready for the big stage. Meanwhile, Notre Dame's defense will create a rough debut for Wisconsin quarterback Colton Joseph, who transferred in from Old Dominion. Wisconsin doesn't have the kind of offensive line it typically had when the program was a Big Ten contender, and Notre Dame will take advantage of it.

Kyle Kelly: Notre Dame 42, Wisconsin 10

The Notre Dame and Wisconsin football programs are on two completely different paths. The Irish, who oddsmakers have awarded the best or second-best odds to win the national championship, are determined to make it back to the title game after finishing runner-up in 2024. On the other hand, the Badgers are looking to make a bowl game for just the second time under Luke Fickell.

Notre Dame arguably has the best roster in college football, while Wisconsin is in full rebuild mode. I look for the state of both programs to be reflected on the scoreboard. Irish by 32.

Mike Singer: Notre Dame 38, Wisconsin 10

The Badgers should be a better squad than their abysmal 2025 season, but Notre Dame still should be able to handle Luke Fickell's squad in a neutral-site matchup. Wisconsin had a nice offseason with portal additions; Notre Dame will be just too much for the Badgers, though.

Jack Soble: Notre Dame 41, Wisconsin 7

With its friendly Big Ten schedule and remade roster, Wisconsin could engineer the turnaround that saves Luke Fickell's job. That turnaround will have to start in Week 2, because a pissed-off Notre Dame team is not messing around.

Old Dominion transfer Colton Joseph is a fun but highly volatile quarterback. My bold prediction is multiple takeaways and at least one defensive touchdown for the Irish, whose secondary should smother any big-play opportunities the Badgers try to create.

WISCONSIN BADGERS ROSTER

No.	Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Cl.	Hometown (High School)
0	Justus Boone	OLB	6-5	278	6th	Sumter, S.C. (Sumter)
0	Tyrell Henry	WR	6-0	184	R-Sr.	Roseville, Mich. (Roseville)
1	Eric Fletcher Jr.	CB	6-1	193	R-So.	Fort Myers, Fla. (Dunbar)
1	Colton Joseph	QB	6'2	215	R-Jr.	Newport Beach, Calif. (Newport Harbor)
2	Chris Brooks Jr.	WR	6'2	224	R-Sr.	St. Louis (St. Louis University School)
2	Javan Robinson	CB	5-11	184	R-Sr.	Orlando, Fla. (West Orange)
3	Cai Bates	CB	6-3	200	R-So.	West Orlando, Fla. (Edgewater)
3	Abu Sama III	RB	5-11	211	Sr.	Des Moines, Iowa (Southeast Polk)
4	Marvin Burks Jr.	S	6-2	210	Sr.	St. Louis (Cardinal Ritter)
5	Carter Smith	QB	6-4	208	R-Fr.	Fort Myers, Fla. (Bishop Verot)
5	Bryce West	CB	5-11	200	R-So.	Cleveland (Glenville)
6	Darrion Dupree	RB	5-11	218	Jr.	Chicago (Mount Carmel)
7	Tyreese Fearbry	OLB	6-4	255	R-Sr.	Pittsburgh (Perry Traditional Academy)
7	Shamar Rigby	WR	6-4	198	Jr.	St. Petersburg, Fla. (Clearwater Central Catholic)
8	Deuce Adams	QB	6-2	207	R-So.	Austin, Texas (Vandergrift)
8	Mason Posa	LB	6-3	235	So.	Albuquerque, N.M. (La Cueva)
9	Jaylon Domingeaux	WR	6-3	211	Sr.	Lafayette, La. (Comeaux)
10	Ryan Hopkins	QB	6-3	205	Fr.	Newport Beach, Calif. (Mater Dei)
11	Kash Brock	WR	6-3	190	Fr.	Chandler, Ariz. (Basha)
11	Carson Van Dinter	S	6-2	207	R-So.	Kaukauna, Wis. (Kaukauna)
12	Nicolas Clayton	OLB	6-5	247	So.	Gainesville, Fla. (Bucholz)
12	Zion Kearney	WR	6-3	210	Jr.	Fresno, Texas (Hightower)
13	Eugene Hilton Jr.	WR	6-2	204	So.	Zionsville, Ind. (Zionsville)
13	Matthew Traynor	S	6-2	211	R-Jr.	Marietta, Ga. (George Walton)
14	Liam Danitz	OLB	6-4	243	R-Sr.	West Branch, Mich. (Ogemaw Heights)
14	Keeyshawn Tabuteau	WR	5-11	188	Fr.	Montreal, Quebec (McCallie School)
15	Sebastian Cheeks	OLB	6-3	243	Gr.	Skokie, Ill. (Evanston Township)
15	Nate Palmer	RB	5-10	205	R-So.	Decatur, Texas (Decatur)
16	Malachi Coleman	WR	6-5	205	R-Jr.	Lincoln, Neb. (Lincoln East)
16	Grant Dean	S	6-1	200	So.	Neenah, Wis. (Neenah)
17	Nizyi Davis	TE	6-5	237	R-Fr.	Indianapolis (Lawrence Central)
17	Carsen Eloms	CB	6-0	194	Fr.	Fishers, Ind. (Fishers)
18	Donovan Dunmore	CB	6-1	202	Fr.	Clovis, Calif. (Buchanan)
18	Danny O'Neil	QB	6-0	202	Jr.	Indianapolis (Cathedral)
19	Thomas Heiberger	LB	6-4	230	R-So.	Sioux Falls, S.D. (Jefferson)
19	Langdon Nordgaard	WR	6-3	214	R-So.	West De Pere, Wis. (West De Pere)
20	Luke Emmerich	S	6-2	195	R-Fr.	Monticello, Minn. (Monticello)
20	Juju Pope	RB	5-11	195	R-So.	Pope, Miss. (South Panola)
21	Bryan Jackson II	RB	6-2	238	Jr.	McKinney, Texas (McKinney)
21	Cairo Skanes	S	6-2	195	So.	Asheville, N.C. (Providence Day)
22	Dorsett Stecker	WR	5-9	195	Fr.	Newport Beach, Calif. (Corona Del Mar)
22	Jaylen Williams	OLB	6-5	265	R-Fr.	Chicago (Palatine)
23	Landon Gauthier	LB	6-3	237	R-So.	Green Bay, Wis. (Bay Port)
24	Zion Legree	WR	5-11	202	Fr.	Pensacola, Fla. (Choctawhatchee)
24	Jai'mier Scott	CB	6-1	192	R-Fr.	Mount Healthy, Ohio (Mount Healthy)
25	Will Mikonowicz	S	6-0	212	Fr.	Reedsburg, Wis. (Reedsburg)
26	Eli Adams	WR	6-0	188	R-So.	Austin, Texas (Vandergrift)
26	Kah'ni Watts	S	6-2	183	Fr.	Fort Myers, Fla. (Iowa Colony [Texas])
27	Raphael Dunn	S	6-4	220	R-So.	Lawrenceville, N.J. (Lawrenceville)
28	Jon Jon Kamara	LB	6-4	243	R-So.	Goodyear, Ariz. (Desert Edge)
29	Matthew Jung	S	6-3	213	R-Sr.	Neenah, Wis. (Neenah)
30	Charles Perkins	DL	6-2	333	R-Sr.	Memphis, Tenn. (Memphis Academy of H.S.)
32	Harrison Bortolotti	RB	5-9	202	So.	Whitefish Bay, Wis. (Whitefish Bay)
34	Ashton Fickell	OLB	6-4	248	Fr.	Madison, Wis. (Edgewood)
37	Treve Stoffel	TE	6-4	214	Fr.	Mosinee, Wis. (Mosinee)
38	Mason Lane	RB	6-1	220	R-So.	Lodi, Wis. (Lodi)
39	Jayden Loftin	OLB	6-4	250	R-Fr.	Somerville, N.J. (Somerville)
41	McCoy Smith	FB	5-11	231	Fr.	Waunakee, Wis. (Waunakee)
42	Tyler Jansey	FB	6-1	236	R-Jr.	Batavia, Ill. (Batavia)
43	Taylor Schaefer	LB	6-3	242	Jr.	Sturgeon Bay, Wis. (Southern Door)
44	Cooper Catalano	LB	6-1	232	So.	Richfield, Wis. (Germantown)
45	Yahya Gaad	OLB	6-4	258	Fr.	Medina, Tenn. (South Gibson County)
46	James Roe	LS	6-0	219	Jr.	Kennesaw, Ga. (North Cobb)
47	Evan Van Dyn Hoven	OLB	6-3	244	R-Jr.	Menasha, Wis. (Menasha)
48	Andrew Goodman	LS	5-11	223	R-Sr.	Montreal, Quebec (John Abbott Academy)
49	Aydon Fickell	TE	6-4	242	Fr.	Madison, Wis. (Edgewood)
49	Ben Wenzel	LB	6-4	222	Fr.	Appleton, Wis. (Appleton North)
50	Ryan Cory	OL	6-4	310	R-So.	Gibsonia, Pa. (Pine-Richland)
50	Sam Lateju	OLB	6-5	240	R-Fr.	Lagos, Nigeria (Lawrenceville)
51	Michael Garner	OLB	6-7	315	Sr.	Chicago Heights, Ill. (Bloom Township)
51	Austin Kawecki	OL	6-4	310	Gr.	Frisco, Texas (Lebanon Trail)
52	Hardy Watts	OL	6-5	321	R-Fr.	Boston, Mass. (Dexter Southfield)
53	Cam Clark	OL	6-7	300	R-Fr.	Dexter, Mich. (Dexter)
54	Brady Bekkenhuis	OL	6-7	323	Fr.	Arlington, Mass. (Arlington)
55	Drew Braam	LB	6-1	230	R-So.	Oak Creek, Wis. (Oak Creek)
55	Kevin Heywood	OL	6-9	320	R-So.	Limerick, Pa. (Pope John Paul II)
58	Michael Roeske	OL	6-8	324	R-Fr.	Wautoma, Wis. (Wautoma)
59	Aaron Witt	LB	6-6	241	Gr.	Winona, Minn. (Winona)
60	Nolan Davenport	OL	6-6	308	R-Fr.	Massillon, Ohio (Massillon)
64	Evan Brown	OL	6-4	315	R-Jr.	Tallahassee, Fla. (Maclay)
65	Aiden Dirksen	OL	6-6	338	Fr.	Green Bay, Wis. (Bay Port)
70	Barrett Nelson	OL	6-6	308	R-Sr.	Stoughton, Wis. (Stoughton)
71	PJ Wilkins	OL	6-6	335	R-Jr.	Atlanta (Saint Frances)
72	Lucas Simmons-Johansson	OL	6-7	323	R-Jr.	Stockholm, Sweden (Clearwater Academy [Fla.])
73	Blake Cherry	OL	6-5	310	So.	Claremore, Okla. (Owasso)
75	Emerson Mandell	OL	6-5	325	R-So.	Moundsview, Minn. (Irondale)
76	Stylz Blackmon	OL	6-4	316	Jr.	Grain Valley, Mo. (Grain Valley)
76	Dillan Johnson	DL	6-2	315	Jr.	Plainfield, Ill. (Joliet Catholic)
77	Peyton Lange	OL	6-9	345	R-Jr.	Minneapolis (Minnehaha Academy)
77	Will McDonald	OLB	6-4	270	R-Jr.	Houlton, Wis. (Hudson
78	Colin Cubberly	OL	6-6	325	R-So.	Lagrangeville, N.Y. (Arlington)
79	Logan Powell	OL	6-5	308	R-Fr.	Phoenix (Brophy Prep Jesuit)
81	Mason Kelley	WR	6-1	199	R-Fr.	Mukwonago, Wis. (Mukwonago)
82	Emmett Bork	TE	6-6	257	R-Fr.	Oconomowoc, Wis. (Oconomowoc)
84	Ryan Schwendeman	TE	6-4	252	Gr.	O'Fallon, Mo. (St. Dominic)
85	Grant Stec	TE	6-6	258	R-So.	Sleepy Hollow, Ill. (Henry Jacobs)
86	Jack Sievers	TE	6-4	245	Fr.	Everett, Wash. (Archbishop Murphy)
87	Jackson McGohan	WR	6-4	220	R-Jr.	Miamisburg, Ohio (Miamisburg)
89	Jacob Harris	TE	6-6	265	R-Jr.	Columbus, Ohio (Westerville Central)
90	Djidjou Bah	DL	6-3	278	Fr.	Memphis, Tenn. (Germantown)
90	Will Kelly	P	5-11	165	Fr.	Madison, Wis. (Edgewood)
91	Hammond Russell IV	DL	6-4	320	6th	Columbus, Ohio (Dublin Coffman)
91	Sean West	P	6-2	205	R-So.	Mequon, Wis. (Homestead)
92	Nolan Vils	DL	6-2	305	R-Jr.	Prairie DuSac, Wis. (Sauk Prairie)
93	DeNigel Cooper	DL	6-3	277	R-So.	Kingsland, Ga. (Camden County)
94	Brady Melum	K	6-0	221	Fr.	Sun Prairie, Wis. (Sun Prairie East)
94	Xavier Ukponu	DL	6-3	322	R-Fr.	Denton, Texas (Guyer)
95	Jacob Anderson	DL	6-4	305	Gr.	Davis, Ill. (Durand)
96	Arthur Scott III	DL	6-3	307	Fr.	Streetsboro, Ohio (Streetsboro)
97	Gavin Lahm	K	6-1	218	Gr.	Kaukauna, Wis. (Kaukauna)
97	Junior Poyser	DL	6-2	331	R-Jr.	Brampton, Ontario (Williston Northampton School)
98	Ethan Tranel	P	6-1	225	R-Jr.	Blue Mounds, Wis. (Mt. Horeb)

NOTRE DAME FIGHTING IRISH ROSTER

No.	Player	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Cl./Elig.	Hometown (High School)
0	Tionne Gray	DL	6-5	330	R-So./3	St. Louis (Hazelwood Central)
0	Quincy Porter	WR	6-4	207	So./3	New Milford, N.J. (Bergen Catholic)
1	Dallas Golden	CB	6-0	191	So./3	Tampa, Fla. (Berkeley Prep)
1	Jaden Greathouse	WR	6-1	215	R-Jr./2	Austin, Texas (Westlake)
2	Nolan James Jr.	RB	5-10	212	R-Fr./4	Westwood, N.J. (DePaul Catholic)
2	DJ McKinney	CB	6-1	185	R-Sr./1	Colleyville, Texas (Colleyville Heritage)
3	Mylan Graham	WR	6-1	192	R-So./3	Fort Wayne, Ind. (New Haven)
3	Jaylen Sneed	LB	6-1	227	R-Sr./1	Hilton Head Island, S.C. (Hilton Head)
4	Jaiden Ausberry	LB	6-1	226	R-Jr./2	Baton Rouge, La. (University Lab)
4	Bubba Frazier	WR	5-10	182	Fr./4	Savannah, Ga. (Benedictine Military)
5	Boubacar Traore	DL	6-5	253	R-Jr./2	Boston (Catholic Memorial)
5	Cam Williams	WR	6-2	201	R-So./3	Glen Ellyn, Ill. (Glenbard South)
6	Christopher Burgess Jr.	DL	6-4	300	R-Fr./4	Chicago (Simeon Career Academy)
6	Jordan Faison	WR	5-11	185	Sr./1	Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (Pine Crest)
7	Francis Brewu	DL	6-1	285	Jr./2	Westerville, Ohio (Thomas Worthington)
7	Ty Washington	TE	6-4	253	R-Sr./1	Leesburg, Ga. (Lee County)
8	Jerome Bettis Jr.	WR	6-2	199	R-Fr./4	Atlanta (Woodward Academy)
8	Adon Shuler	S	6-0	202	R-Jr./2	Irvington, N.J. (Irvington)
9	Teddy Jarrard	QB	6-4	207	Fr./4	Kennesaw, Ga. (North Cobb)
9	Brauntae Johnson	S	6-2	200	R-So./3	Fort Wayne, Ind. (North Side)
10	Noah Grubbs	QB	6-4	209	Fr./4	Lake Mary, Fla. (Lake Mary)
10	Loghan Thomas	DL	6-3	215	Jr./2	Katy, Texas (St. Edward [Ohio])
11	Devin Fitzgerald	WR	6-2	208	Fr./4	Paradise Valley, Ariz. (Brophy College Prep.)
11	Keon Keeley	DL	6-5	275	R-Jr./2	Tampa, Fla. (Berkeley Prep)
12	Blake Hebert	QB	6-2	216	R-Fr./4	Boxford, Mass. (Brunswick School [Conn.])
12	Jayden Sanders	CB	6-0	195	So./3	Kilgore, Texas (Kilgore)
13	CJ Carr	QB	6-2	215	R-So./3	Saline, Mich. (Saline)
13	Ayden Pouncey	CB	6-3	180	Fr./4	Orlando, Fla. (Winter Park)
14	Ebenezer Ewetade	DL	6-4	240	Fr./4	Raleigh, N.C. (South Garner)
14	Micah Gilbert	WR	6-2	205	R-So./3	Charlotte, N.C. (Charlotte Christian)
15	Leonard Moore	CB	6-2	197	Jr./2	Round Rock, Texas (Round Rock)
15	Brayden Robinson	WR	5-7	168	Fr./4	Red Oak, Texas (Red Oak)
16	Dylan Faison	WR	6-2	163	Fr./4	Weston, Fla. (Saint Andrews School)
16	Ko'o Kia	LB	6-2	225	R-Fr./4	Kahalu'u, Hawai'i (Punahou)
17	Elijah Burress	WR	6-1	190	R-Fr./4	Totowa, N.J. (DePaul Catholic)
18	Kaydon Finley	WR	6-1	207	Fr./4	Aledo, Texas (Aledo)
18	Erik Schmidt	P	6-2	211	So./3	Milwaukee (Marquette University)
19	Madden Faraimo	LB	6-2	235	So./3	Oceanside, Calif. (JSerra Catholic)
19	Logan Saldate	WR	5-11	185	R-So./3	Gilroy, Calif. (Palma)
20	Joey O'Brien	S	6-5	203	Fr./4	Roxborough, Pa. (La Salle Prep)
20	Jonaz Walton	RB	5-9	214	Fr./4	Carrollton, Ga. (Central)
21	Khary Adams	CB	6-1	187	Fr./4	Baltimore (Loyola Blakefield)
21	Kedren Young	RB	5-11	234	R-So./3	Lufkin, Texas (Lufkin)
22	Ethan Long	S	6-2	204	R-Fr./4	Milford, Conn. (Brunswick School)
22	Aneyas Williams	RB	5-10	210	Jr./2	Hannibal, Mo. (Hannibal)
23	Ja'Kobe Clapper	LB	6-1	230	Fr./4	Cincinnati (St. Xavier)
24	Ian Premer	TE	6-6	240	Fr./4	Great Bend, Kan. (Great Bend)
24	Mark Zackery IV	CB	5-10	184	So./3	Indianapolis (Ben Davis)
25	Brandon Logan	S	5-11	197	R-Fr./4	Fort Wayne, Ind. (Snider)
26	Javian Osborne	RB	5-9	200	Fr./4	Forney, Texas (Forney)
26	Chaz Smith	CB	6-1	172	Fr./4	Knoxville, Tenn. (Knoxville Catholic)
27	Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa	LB	6-3	230	Jr./2	Inland Empire, Calif. (St. John Bosco)
28	Luke Talich	S	6-4	204	Sr./1	Cody, Wyo. (Cody)
29	Christian Gray	CB	6-0	186	Sr./1	St. Louis (De Smet)
30	Patrick Downes^	S	6-1	204	Fr./4	Delray Beach, Fla. (The Benjamin School)
31	Xavier Southall^	WR	6-0	180	So./3	Alexandria, Va. (IMG Academy [Fla.])
32	Nick Reddish	CB	5-10	195	Fr./4	Charlotte, N.C. (Independence)
33	Matt Jeffery^	WR	5-11	195	So./3	Cheshire, Conn. (Cheshire)
34	Drayk Bowen	LB	6-2	232	Sr./1	St. John, Ind. (Andrean)
35	Spencer Porath	K	6-0	200	Jr./2	Brownsburg, Ind. (Brownsburg)
35	Teddy Rezac	LB	6-3	226	R-So./3	Omaha, Neb. (Westside)
36	Micah Drescher	K	6-5	196	Fr./4	Hinsdale, Ill. (Hinsdale Central)
37	Kurt Smith^	RB	5-9	187	Fr./4	South Beloit, Ill. (Hononegah)
38	Tommy Powlus^	LB	6-1	213	Jr./2	Granger, Ind. (Penn)
39	Jasper Scaife	P	6-6	215	Fr./4	West Perth, West Australia (Warwick Sr.)
40	Dominik Hulak	DL	6-3	260	R-Fr./4	Glendale Heights, Ill. (Immaculate Conception)
42	Cole Mullins	DL	6-4	280	R-So./3	Hoschton, Ga. (Mill Creek)
42	Henry Garrity^	TE	6-4	230	Sr./1	Bloomfield Hills, Mich. (Brother Rice)
43	Kahanu Kia	LB	6-2	225	R-Jr./2	Kahalu'u, Hawai'i (Punahou)
44	Rodney Dunham	DL	6-4	242	Fr./4	Charlotte, N.C. (Myers Park)
46	Matt Williams^	RB	5-9	195	Sr./1	Naperville, Ill. (Neuqua Valley)
47	Jason Onye	DL	6-5	295	R-Sr./1	North Providence, R.I. (Bishop Hendricken)
48	Chase Young^	S	6-2	199	Fr./4	Eagan, Minn. (Saint Thomas Academy)
49	Andrew Kros^	LS	6-4	227	Jr./2	Louisville, Ky. (St. Xavier)
50	Sullivan Garvin	OL	6-5	315	Fr./4	Allegan, Mich. (Allegan)
51	Ben Nichols	OL	6-5	320	Fr./4	Davison, Mich. (Davison)
52	Devan Houstan	OL	6-4	305	R-Jr./2	Mississauga, Ontario (St. James School)
54	Anthonie Knapp	OL	6-5	304	Jr./2	Roswell, Ga. (Roswell)
55	Tiki Hola	DL	6-3	310	Fr./4	Bastrop, Texas (Bastrop)
55	Chris Terek	OL	6-5	321	R-Jr./2	Glen Ellyn, Ill. (Glenbard West)
56	Charles Jagusah	OL	6-5	330	R-Jr./2	Rock Island, Ill. (Alleman)
56	Elijah Hughes	DL	6-3	295	Sr./1	Arlington, Va. (Washington-Liberty)
57	Cam Herron	OL	6-2	291	R-Fr./4	Indianapolis (Warren Central)
58	Matty Augustine	OL	6-8	310	R-Fr./4	Greenwich, Conn. (Brunswick School)
58	Thomas Davis Jr.	LB	6-2	225	Fr./4	Weddington, N.C. (Weddington)
59	Sean Sevillano Jr.	DL	6-2	320	R-So./3	Winnipeg, Manitoba (Clearwater Academy [Fla.])
60	Max Anderson^	OL	6-3	303	Jr./2	St. Paul, Minn. (St. Thomas Academy)
60	Davion Dixon	DL	6-2	316	R-Fr./4	Homestead, Fla. (Miami Palmetto
61	Robbie Wollan^	OL	6-4	300	Jr./2	St. Paul, Minn. (St. Thomas Academy)
64	Joe Otting	OL	6-4	305	R-Jr./2	Topeka, Kan. (Hayden)
65	Grayson McKeogh	OL	6-7	298	Fr./4	Perkasie, Pa. (La Salle Prep)
66	Tyler Merrill	OL	6-6	330	Fr./4	Mechanicsburg, Pa. (Cumberland Valley)
67	Gregory Patrick	OL	6-6	281	Fr./4	Portage, Mich. (Portage Northern)
68	Charlie Thom	OL	6-7	280	Fr./4	Darien, Conn. (Avon Old Farms)
70	Ashton Craig	OL	6-5	310	R-Sr./1	Lawrenceburg, Ind. (Lawrenceburg)
71	Styles Prescod	OL	6-6	298	R-So./3	Fishers, Ind. (Hamilton Southeastern)
74	Will Black	OL	6-7	316	R-Fr./4	London, Ontario (Choate Rosemary Hall [Conn.])
75	Sullivan Absher	OL	6-7	320	R-Jr./2	Belmont, N.C. (South Point)
76	Guerby Lambert	OL	6-7	325	R-So./3	Boston (Catholic Memorial)
77	Peter Jones	OL	6-5	315	R-So./3	Coatesville, Pa. (Malvern Prep)
78	Owen Strebig	OL	6-8	302	R-Fr./4	Brookfield, Wis. (Waukesha Catholic Memorial)
84	Preston Fryzel	TE	6-4	225	Fr./4	Holland, Ohio (Central Catholic)
85	Jack Larsen	TE	6-3	248	R-So./3	Charlotte, N.C. (Charlotte Catholic)
86	Kaleb Johnson^	TE	6-2	241	Fr./4	Mishawaka, Ind. (Mishawaka Marian)
87	Cooper Flanagan	TE	6-6	250	R-Jr./2	Pleasant Hill, Calif. (De La Salle)
88	Armel Mukam	DL	6-3	296	R-Jr./2	La Prairie, Quebec (Woodberry Forest School)
88	James Flanigan	TE	6-6	251	R-Fr./4	Green Bay, Wis. (Notre Dame de la Baie Academy)
89	Austin Ratigan^	TE	6-4	223	Fr./4	Highstown, N.J. (The Peddie School)
90	Elijah Golden	DL	6-4	292	Fr./4	Fredericksburg, Va. (Cardinal Mooney)
91	Gordy Sulfsted	DL	6-5	275	R-Fr./4	Cincinnati (St. Xavier)
94	Joe Reiff	DL	6-5	264	R-Fr./4	Elmhurst, Ill. (York Community)
95	Bryce Young	DL	6-6	260	Jr./2	Charlotte, N.C. (Charlotte Christian)
96	Joseph Vinci^	LS	6-4	231	So./3	Westwood, Mass. (Westwood)

Date: Sept. 12, 2026
Site (capacity): Notre Dame Stadium (77,622)
Kickoff (TV): 3:30 p.m. ET (NBC)
All-time series: Notre Dame leads 5-0
Last meeting: Notre Dame 48, Rice 17 (Aug. 30, 2014, at Notre Dame Stadium)
2025 Record: 5-8 (2-6 AAC)
Rice head coach: Scott Abell (second season, 5-8 entering 2026)

Season outlook: Notre Dame defensive coordinator Chris Ash will not only see a familiar face Sept. 12 when Rice rotates onto the Irish football schedule for the first time in 12 years, he'll have to come up with a game plan to defend him.

Preston Zinter, a valuable special teamer during his three seasons at Notre Dame and a reserve defender, opened the Owls' training camp in August as their top option at the tight end position. Zinter transferred to Rice in January after coming to the Irish as a linebacker and then migrating to defensive end.

Zinter and Rice visit Notre Dame Stadium for the Irish home opener Sept. 12, a week after the Owls open at home against Houston Christian and six days after Notre Dame kicks off the 2026 season against Wisconsin at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis.

The 6-2, 245-pound redshirt junior will be part of an offense that is called the "gun choice" scheme, a modernized version of the triple-option brought to Rice by second-year head coach Scott Abell.

It leans heavily into the run game — the Owls were 15th nationally in rushing offense last season and second-to-last in passing offense (133rd). Overall, they were 124th in scoring offense, and were 0-6 when they didn't reach the 190-yard mark in rushing last year.

Quarterback Jacurri Brown is a former four-star prospect and a career backup in his two seasons each at Miami and UCF.

PHOTO COURTESY RICE ATHLETICS

Rice has a new triggerman leading the offense, 6-4, 207-pound redshirt senior Jacurri Brown, a former four-star prospect and a career backup in his two seasons each at Miami and UCF.

Pass defense was Rice's biggest weakness on the other side of the ball, ranking 124th nationally in pass efficiency defense. And Abell is attempting to address that with seven of the Owls' 21 incoming transfers this offseason being defensive backs.

Of note, Notre Dame electing to opt out of the bowl scene last December, along with Iowa State and Kansas State, led to Rice and two other 5-7 teams playing in bowls. The Owls got trucked, however, 41-10 by Texas State in the Armed Forces Bowl.

— Eric Hansen

2026 SCHEDULE

Date	Opponent	Time (ET)
Sept. 5	Houston Christian	7 p.m.
Sept. 12	at Notre Dame	3:30 p.m.
Sept. 19	Western Michigan	7 p.m.
Sept. 26	at Fresno State	10 p.m.
Oct. 3	UTSA	TBA
Oct. 10	at East Carolina	TBA
Oct. 17	Tulsa	TBA
Oct. 24	at Florida Atlantic	TBA
Nov. 7	at North Texas	TBA
Nov. 14	Tulane	TBA
Nov. 19	at Temple	7:30
Nov. 28	Army	TBA

RICE TWO-DEEP DEPTH CHART

OFFENSE

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
TE	9	Preston Zinter	6-2	254	R-Jr.
	17	Jake Renda	6-5	225	R-Sr.
TT*	53	Luke Miller	6-5	304	R-So.
	67	Luke Needham	6-5	320	Jr.
TG*	71	Cole Principe	6-4	310	So.
	60	Leo Bluhm	6-4	315	R-Sr.
C	56	Nate Bledsoe	6-4	315	R-Jr.
	68	Scott Becker	6-2	309	R-Sr.
SG*	50	Patrick Valent	6-3	330	R-Jr.
	74	Clay Mitchell	6-4	308	Fr.
ST*	73	Justin Michaelis	6-4	321	R-Fr.
	58	Peyton Farmer	6-6	300	R-Jr.
QB	11	Jacurri Brown	6-4	227	R-Sr.
	4	Gael Ochoa	6-2	197	R-So.
RB	10	Quinton Jackson	5-7	175	R-Sr.
	28	D'Andre Hardeman Jr.	5-8	197	So.
or	26	Tyvonn Byars	5-10	217	So.
WR-Z	6	Ben Grice	6-0	194	R-So.
	19	Jordan Clark	5-10	187	R-Fr.
or	22	Michael Sifford	5-11	164	Fr.
WR-X	0	Payton Matthews	5-11	185	So.
	7	Barry Jackson Jr.	5-11	198	R-Jr.
Slot	5	Davis Lane	6-1	201	R-Sr.
	8	Colin Leahey	6-0	192	R-Fr.
or	13	Max Mosey	6-0	200	R-Sr.

DEFENSE

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
DE	8	Joseph Mutombo	6-5	271	R-Jr.
	94	Braden Bays	6-3	269	R-Fr.
DT	96	Dillan Botts	6-1	286	Sr.
	11	Christopher Clark-Jolivet	6-1	295	R-Jr.
NT	57	Aquantis Clemmons	5-11	286	R-Jr.
	15	Matthew Aribisala	6-2	308	R-Sr.
RUSH	16	Chibby Nwajuaku	6-2	246	R-Sr.
	13	Tariq May	6-4	244	R-Sr.
MIKE	99	Jesus Machado Jr.	6-1	216	R-Sr.
	33	Stone Combs	6-1	227	R-Sr.
WILL	54	Austin Harnetiaux	6-2	228	R-Sr.
	14	Beau Barton	6-2	205	R-Jr.
VIPER	7	AJ Brown	6-0	188	R-Sr.
	2	Jo Chavez	6-0	194	Jr.
SS	0	Daveon Hook	5-11	190	Gr.
	18	Ahran Ogbor	5-10	205	So.
FS	3	Koa Akui	5-10	193	R-Sr.
	25	Caden VerMaas	6-0	190	R-Fr.
RCB	12	Jamir Benjamin	5-10	185	R-So.
	10	Kyren Condoll	6-2	186	R-So.
or	5	Jerrick Harper	6-0	191	Sr.
LCB	1	Zach Cody	6-0	172	R-So.
	20	Bailey Fletcher	5-11	190	R-So.
or	5	Jerrick Harper	6-0	191	Sr.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Pos.	No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.	Yr.
PK	28	Enock Gota	6-0	209	R-Sr.
	49	Tommy Bauchiero	5-11	197	Fr.
KO	28	Enock Gota	6-0	209	R-Sr.
	49	Tommy Bauchiero	5-11	197	Fr.
P	29	Charlie Durkin	6-0	190	R-Sr.
	49	Tommy Bauchiero	5-11	197	Fr.
LS	48	Phoenix Derichsweiler	6-2	216	R-Fr.
or	52	Morrow Evans	6-1	227	R-So.

** Tight/Split OL designations referencing the tight end/split end rather than left/right*

Lake Charles (La.) Sam Houston High offensive lineman Albert Simien, the No. 9 overall player nationally per Rivals, is one of four five-star commits for Notre Dame in the 2027 class,which is the most of any program in the country.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

Eight Numbers For Notre Dame's Elite 2027 Class

FOOTBALL RECRUITING

BY KYLE KELLY

You would be hard-pressed to find a program recruiting at a higher level than Marcus Freeman's Notre Dame Fighting Irish.

Over the last two recruiting cycles, Freeman and his recruiting operation have assembled the nation's No. 2 class, landed nine five-star recruits and added more than two dozen four-star prospects.

The star power and depth of Notre Dame's future roster became evident once again in the Rivals300 update July 20, where the Irish strengthened their case for having the nation's most complete recruiting class.

Blue & Gold Illustrated breaks down eight numbers that illustrate just how dominant Notre Dame's 2027 recruiting class has become.

1. NOTRE DAME LEADS THE NATION IN RIVALS FIVE-STAR RECRUITS

We begin with arguably the most impressive statistic. Of the 23 recruits Rivals currently recognizes as five-stars, four are committed to Notre Dame: Chicago St. Patrick defensive lineman David Folorunsho (No. 8 overall nationally), Lake Charles (La.) Sam Houston High offensive lineman Albert Simien (No. 9), Exton (Pa.) Downingtown East edge rusher Abraham Sesay (No. 15) and Jersey City (N.J.) St. Peter's Prep offensive tackle Oluwasemilore Olubobola (No. 19).

For the second straight year, that's the most of any program.

When the rankings cycle concludes in January, Rivals will increase the number of five-star prospects to 32 to mirror the number of first-round NFL Draft picks. Had the cycle ended after the latest update, Notre Dame would have added a fifth five-star commit in Raleigh (N.C.) Cardinal Gibbons cornerback Xavier Hasan, who checked in at No. 32 overall.

Using the top 32 as the cutoff, the Irish would still lead the nation with five five-star commits. Oklahoma is next with four.

2. FREEMAN IS BUILDING NOTRE DAME FROM THE TRENCHES

Since taking over as head coach, Freeman has consistently emphasized building Notre Dame from the trenches outward. That philosophy is reflected most clearly in the 2027 class, where all four of the Irish's current five-star commits play along the offensive or defensive line.

With Folorunsho and Sesay, both the No. 2 prospects at their respective positions, Notre Dame is the only program with two five-star defensive linemen.

The strength extends to the offensive line, too. Notre Dame is one of only two schools with two five-star offensive linemen: Simien (No. 2 interior offensive lineman) and Olubobola (No. 3 offensive tackle). Oklahoma is the other.

3. NOTRE DAME HAS MORE RIVALS300 COMMITS THAN ANYONE ELSE

The Irish aren't just loaded with elite talent. They also have more ranked prospects than any other program. Notre Dame has by far the most commits in the Rivals300 with 19. Florida, which owns the nation's No. 7 recruiting class, ranks second with 15 Rivals300 commits. Texas A&M, which has the nation's No. 1 class, is third with 14.

Here is a look at all the commits in the Rivals300 in addition to Folorunsho, Simien, Sesay, Olubobola and Hasan:

- Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas wide receiver Julius Jones Jr. (No. 84 overall)
- Cincinnati Anderson cornerback Ace Alston (No. 114 overall)
- Pittsburgh Central Catholic offensive lineman James Halter (No. 127 overall)

• Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas safety Zayden Gamble (No. 171 overall)

• Waco (Texas) Midway running back Lathan Whisenton (No. 173 overall)

• Green Bay (Wis.) Notre Dame de la Baie Academy offensive lineman Richie Flanigan (No. 186 overall)

• Ramsey (N.J.) Don Bosco Prep edge rusher Aidan O'Neil (No. 191 overall)

• Rabun Gap (Ga.) Nacoochee School defensive lineman Segun Alexander (No. 192 overall)

• Chicago Brother Rice defensive lineman Brayden Parks (No. 195 overall)

• Chicago Mount Carmel linebacker Roman Igwebuike (No. 207 overall)

• Springfield (Mass.) Central running back Isaiah Rogers (No. 212 overall)

• Vero Beach (Fla.) High quarterback Champ Monds (No. 215 overall)

• Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy edge rusher Jackson Vaughn (No. 269 overall)

• Choctaw (Okla.) High tight end Titus Hawk (No. 293 overall)

Flanigan, Alexander, Vaughn and Hawk were all new additions to the Rivals300, giving Notre Dame more newcomers than any other program.

4. THE GRADES PAINT AN EVEN STRONGER PICTURE

The rankings tell part of the story. The prospect grades are even more impressive.

Among recruits with a 91 grade or better (ranked No. 220 or higher), Notre Dame has 17 commits. Florida, Miami, Texas A&M and Texas Tech are tied for second with 12 apiece.

While the rankings are the easiest way to compare recruiting classes, the prospect grades are what really matter. Rivals evaluates each recruit and assigns an overall grade based on its scouting projection, then slots prospects into the rankings. According to Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power, ordering players within the same grade is often "like splitting hairs."

For example, 70 prospects currently carry a 91 grade, meaning Rivals views them as roughly the same caliber of player. They still have to be ranked in some order, even though the differences between them may be minimal. By the end of each cycle, five-star prospects typically receive 98 or 99 grades, four-star prospects range from 90 to 97 and three-star prospects receive grades from 80 to 89.

5. NOTRE DAME'S DEFENSIVE LINE CLASS STANDS ALONE

With the Irish being the only program to have two five-star defensive linemen, it's difficult to argue any school has assembled a better defensive front. The depth only strengthens that case.

Defensive line coach Charlie Partridge's class features six Rivals300 commits, the most of any program. Along with Folorunsho and Sesay, the No. 2 prospects at their respective positions, Notre Dame also has the Nos. 17 and 27 edge rushers in O'Neil and Vaughn and the Nos. 23 and 24 defensive linemen in Alexander and Parks.

Auburn, Michigan and Texas A&M are tied for second with four each.

6. NOTRE DAME HAS ASSEMBLED ANOTHER ELITE OFFENSIVE LINE CLASS

It should come as no surprise that offensive line coach Joe Rudolph has once again built the nation's top offensive line haul.

Along with Simien, the No. 2 interior offensive lineman, and Olubobola, the No. 3 offensive tackle, Notre Dame also has the Nos. 7 and 11 interior offensive linemen in Flanigan and Halter.

Florida and Ohio State are tied for second with three Rivals300 offensive line commits each.

7. THE IRISH BOAST ONE OF THE NATION'S BEST CORNERBACK DUOS

With Hasan and Alston, the Nos. 5 and 15 cornerbacks in the class, Notre Dame has arguably the nation's best cornerback tandem.

Florida technically has two cornerbacks with comparable grades — Aamaury Fountain (95 grade) and Raheem Floyd (92 grade) — but they rank No. 38 and No. 125 overall and sit sixth and 18th at the position.

That gives Notre Dame a slight edge.

8. THE RUNNING BACK CLASS IS NEARLY UNMATCHED

Notre Dame may have the nation's second-best running back class as well with Whisenton and Rogers, the Nos. 12 and 17 running backs in the class.

Only LSU's tandem of Tre Segarra and Trey Martin, the Nos. 8 and 10 running backs nationally, grades higher.

Interestingly, Notre Dame accepted Rogers' commitment despite previously prioritizing Segarra, who also held the Irish in high regard during the spring. ✦

Notre Dame Is Building A 'Florida Dame' Recruiting Pipeline

On Feb. 19, new Notre Dame assistant wide receivers coach Shaun Shivers posted "#FloridaDame" on Twitter after he and the Irish staff offered a few underclassman recruits in the Sunshine State. Shivers probably had no idea at the time that he'd be starting a Notre Dame recruiting initiative with that phrase.

Notre Dame had to overhaul its defensive staff in the offseason, and whether it was a coincidence or not, Marcus Freeman hired staffers who all hail from the Sunshine State — defensive line coach Charlie Partridge (Plantation), defensive backs coach Aaron Henry (Immokalee), linebackers coach Brian Jean-Mary (Apopka) and safeties coach Jevaughn Codlin (Delray Beach).

Codlin rejoined the staff after a two-month stint at North Texas, and in mid-February, Notre Dame stole Shivers away from Florida State. And that's to go along with other Irish staffers from Florida, such as running backs coach Ja'Juan Seider (Belle Glade), general manager Mike Martin (Tampa) and defensive analyst Tre Reader (Tampa).

With all these ties in Florida, Notre Dame has made an effort to recruit hard in the state — and it has paid big dividends.

In the 2027 class, Notre Dame has secured verbal commitments from three of the state's top 25 players: four-star wide receiver Julius Jones Jr. (No. 10) and four-star safety Zayden Gamble (No. 14), both from Fort Lauderdale St. Thomas Aquinas, and four-star quarterback Champ Monds (No. 23) of Vero Beach High. It also holds a pledge from one of South Florida's up-and-comers, Hollywood Chaminade-Madonna Prep safety John Gay III (No. 64).

"At first, it was just a saying, but it's real," Gamble told *Blue & Gold Illustrated*. "It's the start of a pipeline. They've got Florida guys there now, but nothing like our class. ... It's just the start of what's to come."

"Coach Shivers — that's my dog," Jones said after his pledge. "He's from down here, and Florida Dame — Coach Shivers started that! They're trying to build a pipeline down here because they know the talent South Florida has. It's the best state for football, and they're trying to get it going."

In the 2028 cycle, the Irish are looking to maintain their momentum in the Sunshine State by offering 27 recruits.

— Mike Singer

Official Visit Leads Talented Defensive Tackle To Notre Dame

BY MIKE SINGER

Only one of Notre Dame's 18 official visitors during the June 19-21 weekend hadn't been to South Bend yet, and that one prospect committed to the Fighting Irish. Granted, 15 of those prospects were already Irish commits headed into the weekend, but with that one target, Notre Dame made quick work.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
SEGUN ALEXANDER

Near the end of the trip, Rabun Gap (Ga.) Nacoochee School class of 2027 defensive tackle Segun "Shaggy" Alexander informed the Irish staff of his commitment, and his decision became public June 12.

"Right before my Notre Dame visit, I had two schools that I really liked, Texas A&M and Clemson," Alexander told Rivals' Chad Simmons. "But going into Notre Dame, I had a feeling I was really going to like the school."

He loved everything about his first experience in South Bend.

"I knew by the second day that I was going to Notre Dame," Alexander continued. "After we finished our first full day of activities and experiencing the people, it just felt different. The only school that came close to that feeling was Clemson, but Notre Dame pulled ahead because of the people. It wasn't fake. It was real."

When explaining why he chose the Irish, Alexander pointed to development, attention to detail and academics.

"First would have to be the people," he said. "I can tell they'll develop me not just as a football player but as a man. Second is the detail. Notre Dame does everything right and doesn't cut corners. Lastly, the education. I felt like Notre Dame had the best of both worlds — great football, great education and a chance to compete for a national championship every year.

"It is really the best of both worlds at Notre Dame."

Alexander, who is Rivals' No. 23 defensive lineman and No. 192 overall player nationally, took official visits to Cal, Texas A&M, Georgia Tech, Clemson and Vanderbilt before making it to South Bend. Oklahoma, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee and several others offered scholarships to him.

Alexander, who is Rivals' No. 23 defensive lineman and No. 192 overall prospect in the land, committed to Notre Dame over Cal, Texas A&M, Georgia Tech, Clemson, Vanderbilt and others.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

The 6-foot-4, 270-pounder was a member of the 2028 class but reclassified to the 2027 cycle in May. Notre Dame offered him in April and decided to continue to recruit him after his reclassification.

According to his team's MaxPreps page, Alexander recorded 36 total stops, 18 tackles for loss, 13 sacks, 19 quarterback hurries, 1 fumble recovery and 1 forced fumble in 12 games.

"He is incredibly strong, and his best football is still ahead of him," Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School head coach Derek White said. "He's only 17 years old. Off the field, he's a special young man. He's an amazing person and has great character. His faith is important to him.

"Shaggy works hard, shows up on time, is a leader and has a quiet and humble soul. He really cares about his teammates and loves them. He's really special."

During his freshman campaign at Lilburn (Ga.) Providence Christian Academy, he posted 53 tackles, 15 stops for loss, 6 sacks and 3 forced fumbles.

In the spring of 2024, Alexander reports that he ran a 4.69-second 40-yard dash at 6-3, 260 pounds. The following spring, he placed third in the 1A-3A Georgia state track and field competition in the shot put.

He is from Toronto and moved to Georgia for high school. Alexander's older brother Oyeka is a redshirt sophomore defensive lineman at Miami (Ohio). ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"You have to start with [Segun Alexander's] explosiveness. He's a very twitchy, athletic interior defensive lineman and makes big-time flash plays on his film. I really like what I see from his movement skills. He's able to convert speed to power and has a compact build. He's around 6-2, 6-3 and carries his weight extremely well. He's densely built with a bunch of muscle mass, and at his size, he shows a lot of burst and play strength. His closing speed pops; Alexander makes plays behind the line of scrimmage at a high rate. He projects as a plus-pass rusher on the interior.

"Alexander gives Notre Dame a disruptive presence on the interior. He's another piece in what's a fantastic haul on the D-line. Notre Dame is recruiting both lines of scrimmage as well as anyone in the 2027 cycle. When you drop him in with the other commits they have, Notre Dame continues to recruit like a national championship contender on the defensive line. They're recruiting at an excellent level, and Alexander continues that."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Five-Star Chicago Defensive Tackle Possesses 'Eye-Popping' Potential

BY KYLE KELLY

Notre Dame defensive line coach Charlie Partridge has delivered head coach Marcus Freeman arguably the biggest defensive verbal commitment

COMMITMENT PROFILE
DAVID FOLORUNSHO

of Freeman's five years leading the program.

On May 15, Chicago St. Patrick five-star defensive lineman David Folorunsho publicized his pledge to the Fighting Irish over a finalist group that included Miami, Texas Tech, Georgia and Michigan. He announced his decision live during a ceremony on the Rivals YouTube channel.

Since On3 Recruiting — which debuted its rankings in 2021 before rebranding to Rivals last July — began ranking prospects, Folorunsho, the No. 8 overall recruit in the 2027 class, is just the second top-10 player in the overall rankings, at the time of his commitment, to pledge to the Irish during the Freeman era. Last year, Notre Dame landed a commitment from Rivals' No. 7 overall player in the class at the time of his pledge, five-star edge rusher Rodney Dunham. Dunham later finished as Rivals' No. 8 overall prospect in the cycle.

But because of positional need, Folorunsho's location and his eye-popping potential, the 6-foot-3, 285-pounder has a case to be the most significant recruiting win of Freeman's tenure. Folorunsho is also the first top-50 recruit, according to Rivals, that Notre Dame has landed out of Chicago under Freeman.

Folorunsho's commitment carries even more historical significance. According to longtime recruiting analyst Tom Lemming, Folorunsho could become Notre Dame's first five-star-caliber defensive tackle to join the program since Steve Niehaus signed with the Irish in 1972. It is contingent upon Folorunsho remaining in the top 32 — the threshold for five-star status — and signing with the Irish in December.

And it all became possible because of Partridge.

"The main thing that stood out to me is that Coach Partridge is the best developer out of my top five schools," Folorunsho told *Blue & Gold Illustrated* before making his decision public. "Just knowing that, I'm just like, 'Why would I not want to get coached by the top developer in college football?'"

Rivals rates Folorunsho as a five-star talent, the No. 1 player in Illinois, and the No. 2 defensive lineman and No. 8 overall recruit in the country.
PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

Partridge offered Folorunsho Feb. 6 during a pivotal stage of his recruitment.

After a breakout junior season at St. Patrick in which he totaled 56 tackles, 14 tackles for loss and 6 sacks, Folorunsho reported scholarship offers from 28 Power Four programs. It solidified his emergence as one of the country's most coveted prospects, with 39 Power Four schools ultimately extending offers before his commitment announcement.

Rivals reinforced Folorunsho's rising reputation, elevating him to five-star status and ranking him as the No. 1 player in Illinois and the No. 2 defensive lineman nationally. Four days later, Folorunsho was back at Notre Dame for what proved to be a game-changing visit.

On April 24, Folorunsho unofficially visited Notre Dame with his mother. It marked his second trip to campus in seven days.

Folorunsho's first visit to South Bend after receiving his Irish offer came April 17 alongside his head coach, Tom Zbikowski, and St. Patrick president Dan Santucci. Zbikowski (2004-07) and Santucci (2003-06) both played at Notre Dame and strongly advocated for the program throughout Folorunsho's recruitment.

Still, the Irish needed to win over Folorunsho's mother. That's where Freeman came through during the April 24 visit.

"Getting Coach Freeman in front of my mom and having her feel safe that I'm in good hands was a huge part," Folorunsho said.

When *Blue & Gold Illustrated* recruiting insider Mike Singer interviewed Folorunsho after the visit, the Chicagoland recruit said he planned to take his official visits and announce a commitment at the end of the summer. But after Folorunsho and his mother sat down to discuss the recruiting process, they decided to accelerate the timeline.

"I feel like I had all the information that I needed to make my decision," he said. "My mom and I talked about it, and we decided to make it earlier."

For Folorunsho, the main thing is focusing on his senior season. Now, he enters that year with his college decision finalized and full confidence in the direction of Freeman's program.

"I have a huge belief in what they're doing," he said. "Coach Freeman is a leader of men. What he's building and the people he has surrounded himself with in the program are phenomenal." ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"David Folorunsho is an attacking defensive tackle who has the potential to wreck games with his athleticism and natural ability. We project him as a difference-maker on the interior. Offensive lines will have to game plan for him. When you have a presence like that on the interior, it opens things up for your pass rushers on the outside and linebackers blitzing. He's going to be a load to deal with. ...

"There's so much to like here, and landing him is huge for the Irish. Notre Dame is showing no signs of slowing down. They're stacking early-round NFL talent, especially along the lines of scrimmage. They're recruiting like a big-boy program that plays big-boy football. Notre Dame is stacking its roster with talent that can make deep runs in the College Football Playoff, and Folorunsho adds to the momentum the Irish are building under Marcus Freeman."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Fighting Irish Flip California Offensive Lineman Away from UCLA

BY MIKE SINGER

Notre Dame is often good for one out-of-the-blue surprise commitment in every recruiting cycle, and for the 2027 class, it was West Hill (Calif.) Chaminade offensive lineman Jackson Hill.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
JACKSON HILL

The 6-foot-6½, 300-pounder announced May 14 that he would be flipping his commitment from UCLA to Notre Dame, without ever posting on social media that he had an offer from the Irish.

Hill committed to UCLA April 4, picking the Bruins over Oregon State, Colorado State, UNLV, Nevada, San Diego State and a few Ivy League schools. He added an offer from Stanford May 5, but a few days later, he privately committed to Notre Dame after a few weeks of a quiet recruiting process with the Irish staff.

"The education at Notre Dame is an opportunity you can't pass up," Hill told *Blue & Gold Illustrated*. "The alumni network is top-notch, and the football is incredibly good. It's not that UCLA had negatives, it's just that Notre Dame had so many positives.

"I fit the best at Notre Dame. During my visit, I was able to eat wings with the offensive linemen, and I felt like I was so similar to those guys."

Notre Dame's recruitment of Hill kicked off just less than a month before his commitment, and in that span, he developed a strong connection with offensive line coach Joe Rudolph.

"He's incredibly smart," Hill said. "You can see the emphasis and detail he puts into his coaching. His message is focused on doing the little things right, and they will add up. I see him as someone who has high integrity and will coach me well, while also taking care of me off the field."

Hill, a three-star prospect who is the Rivals Industry Ranking's No. 34 offensive tackle nationally, was committed to UCLA before switching his allegiance to the Fighting Irish in May. He also considered Oregon State, Colorado State, UNLV, Nevada, San Diego State and several Ivy League schools.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

Hill didn't plan on making a commitment to UCLA just to flip the next month, but his feeling of disappointment on that front is outweighed by how fired up he is to be on the Notre Dame commit list.

"I committed to UCLA and I don't love that I had to flip, but I'm very excited," he added. "It's Notre Dame. It's going to be a great school for me, and I'm going to gain so much from it.

"I'm really humbled to be going to Notre Dame. The fans and the culture of Notre Dame — it's all connected. I'm really excited about the community there. Coach [Marcus] Freeman called me last Thursday when he was in Korea and convinced me that this is the right choice for me. I'm fully bought into his coaching, and he'll make me a better football player and definitely a better man."

Irish assistant general manager Kenny Sanders visited Chaminade April 17 and met with Hill — a three-star prospect and the nation's No. 34 offensive tackle by the Rivals Industry Ranking — for a few minutes. Sanders spoke with the school's head coach, David Machuca, for a while about Hill, too.

A couple of days later, Notre Dame reached back out and asked if Hill could visit April 22. Hill jumped on the opportunity.

"Within 72 hours of Kenny Sanders coming here, Coach Rudolph was calling Jackson and got in contact with me," Machuca said. "From there, it got going really quick."

Hill loved everything about his Notre Dame visit that day.

"I was able to see what Notre Dame was all about," he said. "We were in team meetings then position meetings, followed by practice. When I walked into the practice facility, my jaw dropped. It's genuinely beautiful."

Hill toured campus, met with Freeman, Rudolph, strength coach Loren Landow, offensive coordinator Mike Denbrock, general manager Mike Martin and others. He felt one central message during the visit with his father.

"They have a standard of student-athlete and I think that I fit that standard," Hill said.

Hill earned his offer from Notre Dame during the visit but didn't commit on the spot because he wanted to think things over, especially after making his UCLA pledge three weeks prior and with everything happening so fast.

A week after his visit, Rudolph was back on the West Coast to watch Hill practice and have a home visit.

"We were able to talk even more about why he thinks I'm a great fit for Notre Dame," Hill said.

On May 8, Hill called the Notre Dame staff to give them his commitment.

"Notre Dame is not only getting a phenomenal football player but an incredible young man," Machuca said. ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"Jackson [Hill] is going to go to work every day, do exactly what you ask him to do, fix what he needs to fix and make his strengths even stronger. He might be more old school; a lot of prospects will do all the camps to get rated higher and get more attention. But that's not who he is.

"He's a mean player. You wouldn't know that about him. Between the whistles, he has a big smile on his face and is the nicest guy. But as soon as the ball is snapped, he turns into someone completely different."

— West Hill (Calif.) Chaminade head coach David Machuca

Four-Star Chicago Linebacker Is Eager To Develop At Notre Dame

BY KYLE KELLY

With Notre Dame linebackers Drayk Bowen and Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa possibly NFL-bound after this season, the Irish urgently needed to build out their positional depth in the 2027 cycle. They made major progress on that front by securing a pledge from one of the biggest potential difference-makers in the class.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
ROMAN IGWEBUIKE

Chicago Mount Carmel four-star linebacker Roman Igwebuike announced his verbal commitment to Notre Dame July 11. The 6-foot-3, 220-pounder is one of the country's most coveted prospects, ranking as the No. 9 prospect in Illinois, and the No. 13 linebacker and No. 148 overall player nationally in the Rivals Industry Ranking.

Igwebuike's decision to publicly announce his pledge comes about a month after a transformative multiday official visit the weekend of June 12. Before making the short trip to South Bend, he also officially visited Indiana, Clemson and Missouri. He had a Tennessee official visit scheduled the weekend of June 19.

However, Notre Dame made such a strong impression that his family fully embraced Marcus Freeman's program.

"When we got there for the visit, we saw how dedicated everyone was and how friendly and inviting they were. Even when we went to Coach [Marcus] Freeman and his wife, Joanna's house, they were so nice," Igwebuike's mother Stephanie Bandy told *Blue & Gold Illustrated* in June. "It was almost like you were at home, right down to how my sons and my husband felt. We were very comfortable there. They were very inviting. ...

"Notre Dame definitely made their presence known, and they did a great job of showing us who they are."

The move the Irish made the month prior to his pledge cannot be overstated.

Despite more than 40 Power Four offers and playing his high school football just 85 miles from South Bend, Notre Dame did not offer Igwebuike until midway through his junior season. Irish general manager Mike Martin led the charge for the Mount Carmel standout during a last-minute game-day visit Oct. 4.

But the initial pursuit did not last long.

Igwebuike notched a team-high 115 tackles with 13.5 stops for loss, 7 sacks and 2 interceptions while helping Chicago Mount Carmel capture the Illinois Class 8A state championship during his junior campaign.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

About seven weeks after Igwebuike's visit, the Irish landed their second linebacker commitment in four-star Amarri Irvin. With four-star linebacker Ellis McGaskin on the commit list, former Irish linebackers coach Max Bullough had his 2027 duo. The plan quickly unraveled.

A series of unexpected events prompted a renewed interest in Igwebuike. Bullough left for an elevated position at Michigan State in December, McGaskin decommitted in January, the Irish hired linebackers coach Brian Jean-Mary in February, and Irvin began considering other schools in March before eventually flipping to Virginia Tech in June.

When Jean-Mary joined the program, he hit the reset button on Notre Dame's 2027 linebacker board. Around that same time, *Blue & Gold Illustrated* visited Igwebuike at Mount Carmel in March. He made it clear the Irish had emerged as a major contender in his recruitment.

"Not only because of how close they are, but it's also just a Catholic school. Coming from a Catholic school and going to one doesn't sound like a bad idea," he said. "Not only because of how they've proven to develop linebackers, but also the culture and the program."

Igwebuike returned to campus in April and had extended conversations with Freeman and Jean-Mary. During those meetings, they made it clear they wanted him to be a cornerstone of the class. That message continued to resonate as his recruitment progressed.

"I liked the development part," Igwebuike also said in March. "He talked about how he'll play four linebackers per game, and he'll get me in as a freshman. ... I like their scheme. They have a lot of linebackers on the field most of the time. I like that. I'll be able to get on the field and get developed over the three years that I'll be there because of how much experience I'll have."

Intensified conversations and an unforgettable official visit ultimately tipped the scales in Notre Dame's favor.

"It was a 10 out of 10 visit," Bandy said. "It was wonderful. We had a great time."

Igwebuike helped Mount Carmel to a 14-0 record and the Illinois Class 8A state championship during his junior season, notching a team-best 115 tackles with 13.5 stops for loss, 7 sacks, 2 interceptions, 3 forced fumbles, 1 fumble recovery, 3 passes broken up and 17 QB pressures. ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"[Roman] Igwebuike is a physical, rangy linebacker, and I love his run-and-hit ability. He's at his best when he has a clear pathway to the ball carrier and can use his closing speed and ability to erase angles as a run defender and covering the flats. He's a player we're interested to learn more about and see him in a neutral setting. ...

"There are physical tools to work with for Igwebuike. Improving coordination will be big for him. He's going to benefit from more reps, and you'll want to see better coordination, but the physical tools give the Notre Dame staff a lot to work with. I don't expect him to be an early contributor on defense, but I could see him being a great special teamer as a freshman or sophomore and pushing for a starting role later down the line. I wouldn't classify him like Kyngstonn Viliamu-Asa, who came to Notre Dame so technically advanced. Igwebuike might be a slower burn, but there's a lot to like."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Fighting Irish Land Legacy Recruit, Speedy Playmaker

BY MIKE SINGER

Jones, the son of former Irish star running back Julius Jones Sr., is ranked as the No. 16 wide receiver and No. 84 overall player in the country by Rivals.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

It may have been expected by many that Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas four-star wide receiver Julius Jones Jr. would follow in his father's footsteps and play for the Fighting Irish, but it didn't come without opposition from other top programs.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
JULIUS JONES JR.

He did announce his commitment to Marcus Freeman's program on "The Pat McAfee Show" June 22, giving the Irish a major boost to their 2027 class.

Jones has been Notre Dame's top receiver target since he was offered in March 2025, and the Irish staff — led by wide receivers coach Mike Brown — worked hard to earn his commitment. He visited campus three times, including the Texas A&M game last September and junior day in March 2026. The 5-foot-10, 170-pounder was in town June 19-21 for an official visit.

Jones committed to Notre Dame over Miami, the local program that recruited him hard since his freshman year. He also held offers from Oregon, LSU, Texas A&M, Oklahoma, Ohio State and many others.

"The biggest thing that led me to pick Notre Dame was the real feeling of love, trust and belief in me," Jones told Rivals' Hayes Fawcett about his commitment. "I feel 110 percent that it is the right place for me."

Jones is a Notre Dame legacy — his father, Julius Jones Sr., was a running back for the Irish a couple decades ago. Many may think Jones was a lock for the Irish due to that, and while that gave Notre Dame a built-in advantage, the staff had to do a great job recruiting the No. 16 wide receiver and No. 84 overall player nationally per Rivals.

And they did.

"Ever since I first came into contact with the coaching staff, I had an immediate feeling of true belief," Jones said. "They also made it extremely clear that they recruited me for my skill and the type of person I am, not just because of my father playing there.

"The things he's done and the records he set at Notre Dame are the reasons that I love Notre Dame as a school. The way that I was recruited and the plans they have for me are the reason I will play for Notre Dame."

Jones became Notre Dame's second wide receiver commitment of the 2027 class, joining Highlands Ranch (Colo.) Valor Christian's Jackson Coleman, a Rivals' three-star recruit.

"There's only one Notre Dame," Jones said. "And the mystique of it has always been something that I've been most aware of. Not just from my father, but seeing it, watching them play and understanding the culture that they have. And also the weight of the degree."

Jones' younger brother Andre is a class of 2028 three-star defensive back. Moments after Jones announced his pledge on the ESPN program, Andre also committed to the Fighting Irish over Florida State, Georgia Tech, Penn State, Texas A&M, UCLA and others.

During his team's Florida 5A state championship-winning season in 2025, Jones posted 58 receptions for 876 yards with 14 touchdowns across 15 games.

FILM ANALYSIS

"Julius Jones has the body type of a slot receiver but has the skill set of a guy who can play on the outside. He's a long strider, is able to eat up cushions with his releases and speed off the line of scrimmage, and he's a nuanced route runner. Jones can run a variety of routes; he won't be a one-trick pony with what you ask him to do in your offense."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

St. Thomas Aquinas also won the 5A Florida state championship during his sophomore and freshman seasons as well. He was named to the 2025 MaxPreps Junior All-America first team and the 2025 All-Broward first team.

Jones has been a key member of the St. Thomas Aquinas Raiders' last two Florida 5A state championship teams. St. Thomas Aquinas finished as the No. 8 team in America and No. 2 in Florida in 2025, according to the Massey Ratings.

He led St. Thomas Aquinas in receiving as a sophomore with 51 catches for 750 yards (14.7 yards per catch) and 6 touchdowns in 2024. During his high school career, he has hauled in 120 passes for 1,843 yards and 22 touchdowns.

In March 2026, Jones recorded a personal-best 10.52 in the 100-meter race.

He participated in the 2026 Under Armour All-America Game in Orlando in January and was a top performer during the week of practice. He was also Rivals' MVP of the Under Armour Future 50 event in June 2025.

The elder Jones starred at Notre Dame in the early 2000s, rushing for 3,018 yards and accounting for 27 touchdowns. He was a second-round pick by the Dallas Cowboys in the 2004 draft and played several years in the league.

His uncle is Thomas Jones, an All-America running back for Virginia in 1999 who went on to play in the NFL from 2000-11. He ran for 10,591 yards and accounted for 71 touchdowns during his NFL career. ✦

Notre Dame Checks All The Boxes For Five-Star Offensive Tackle

BY KYLE KELLY

All it took was one trip to Notre Dame for five-star offensive tackle Oluwasemilore Olubobola to buy into Marcus Freeman's program.

On May 12, Olubobola, Rivals' No. 3 offensive tackle and No. 19 overall player nationally in the 2027 class, announced his verbal commitment to the Irish. The Jersey City (N.J.) St. Peter's Prep rising senior's decision came just 16 days after he visited campus for the first time.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
OLUWASEMILORE OLUBOBOLA

"They have a strong culture and coaching staff," the 2025 New Jersey first-team all-state selection told *Blue & Gold Illustrated*, explaining the decision to commit to Notre Dame. "They check all the boxes for me. The head coach is a leader of men, the position coach can develop offensive linemen to be the best they can be, and the strength program is legitimate."

The 6-foot-6, 295-pounder was one of the hottest commodities in the 2027 class with an offer sheet that included opportunities from 38 Power Four programs. He ultimately chose Notre Dame over Miami and Texas A&M, but other top programs also recruited him, including LSU, Penn State, Florida, Ohio State, Oregon, Texas and Michigan.

Offensive line coach Joe Rudolph only offered Olubobola less than two months before his declaration, with the No. 1 player in New Jersey announcing his chance to play for the Irish March 19. But the timing did not matter. Rudolph quickly cultivated a relationship, and their connection flourished because of his coaching style.

Olubobola, Rivals' No. 3 offensive tackle and No 19 overall player, committed to Notre Dame over Miami and Texas A&M May 12.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

The fourth-year Irish assistant reinforced that impression during a trip to New Jersey to see Olubobola during the spring.

"He's a good teacher," Olubobola said. "When he came to visit, we were on the board, and he broke down plays that I would be good at and all that type of stuff. He's really good at communication. … He likes my athleticism, my length and my aggression. He thinks he can develop me to be the best tackle I can be."

Rudolph wasn't the only Irish coach who played a part in Olubobola's decision. He also credited Freeman and general manager Mike Martin with having major roles.

"They came on really strong after the visit," he said. "They kept being persistent. My family and everybody around me loved the idea. And I love the idea, too."

Olubobola's agent, Latish Kinsler of Life-Style Sports Agency, is also a big believer in Freeman. In addition to Olubobola, Kinsler also represents Irish sophomore wide receiver Quincy Porter, who transferred to Notre Dame from Ohio State this offseason.

"How they care about the players is very meaningful," Kinsler told *Blue & Gold Illustrated*. "Football is a business, but to be able to have that personal side and to personally guarantee that you're going to make sure each young man is successful in life speaks volumes."

Olubobola is the fourth St. Peter's Prep prospect to commit to the Irish within the last 13 years.

The all-male Jesuit prep school in New Jersey has also produced quarterback Brandon Wimbush, defensive linemen Justin Ademilola and Jayson Ademilola and linebacker Shayne Simon. Current Notre Dame defensive analyst Chase Jones is also from St. Peter's Prep.

During his Notre Dame visit, Olubobola connected with the Ademilolas and Simon while they were on campus for the Blue-Gold Game. Spending time with former St. Peter's Prep players gave him a clearer picture of how he would fit in at Notre Dame.

"They just showed me it will be very similar to what I'm already going through here at Prep," he said. "The transition from high school to college will be very smooth for me. … St. Peter's and Notre Dame share similar values."

Olubobola's Notre Dame recruitment might have moved fast, but nothing could beat the package the Irish could offer.

"It's just the standard they hold all their players to," Olubobola said. "Great education, great football, great coaching, great culture, all of that." ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"Oluwasemilore Olubobola's frame, length, burgeoning power and movement skills remind us of Ronnie Stanley. Like Stanley, Olubobola is a high-upside, developmental offensive tackle prospect with high-end traits for the position. Both have similar frames, with Olubobola being more filled out at the same stage. Olubobola also shows more power, while Stanley was more of a smooth mover with his basketball background.

"Olubobola has outstanding physicality. He's a nasty run blocker and improved his overall flexibility and pad level. He's a tall tackle, and you wanted to see him play with more leverage, and you saw that on his junior film. What he put on his junior tape was really encouraging with his combination of movement skills to go with his length. He added play strength as well.

"There's so much to like here. Olu has the look of an ascending prospect and one who has inched up the rankings the more we've gotten into his junior season. This is a huge get for Notre Dame. They've obviously done a great job of stacking talent on the offensive line. They've really added some high-upside, projectable offensive tackles."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Four-Star's Path To Notre Dame Was Paved By Relationships

BY KYLE KELLY

When it mattered most, Marcus Freeman and the Notre Dame coaching staff left no doubt in Brayden Parks' recruitment.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
BRAYDEN PARKS

After months of wrestling with a decision between Notre Dame and Oregon, the four-star, 6-foot-1, 308-pound defensive lineman from Chicago Brother Rice made his call July 23, announcing his verbal commitment to the Fighting Irish.

Parks — Rivals' No. 10 player in Illinois, and No. 24 defensive lineman and No. 195 overall player nationally in the 2027 class — chose Freeman's program after visiting both schools in April and then again in June.

In total, Parks made eight recruiting visits to South Bend, giving the Irish coaching staff ample opportunities to build credibility with him and his family. Their efforts ultimately paid off.

Parks credited his relationships with Freeman and defensive line coach Charlie Partridge for tipping the scales in Notre Dame's favor. Partridge, who joined the program in January, made a major impression on the No. 2 defensive tackle recruit in the Midwest.

FILM ANALYSIS

"Brayden Parks is a fantastic high school defensive lineman. He's a disruptive presence on the interior, extremely quick off the ball, aggressive and has quick hands. He creates constant disruption in the backfield. Parks comes from a top program in Chicago and has played a lot of meaningful football the last couple of years. He makes the most of what he has. Parks had a very good junior season, and when you look at his ability to disrupt, shoot gaps and be a pass-rusher three-technique, he shows a lot of ability. Over 20 tackles for loss as a defensive lineman is a strong mark.

"Parks isn't the most imposing defensive lineman. We measured him at a shade under 6-1, and more importantly, he has 31-inch arms, which is smaller than what we saw from most top players at his position. That's something he'll have to compensate for with his quickness and technical ability. He's a very good player. When you can surround him with really gifted defensive end prospects and a space-eater at nose tackle, that will help put Parks in favorable situations."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Parks, Rivals' No. 24 defensive lineman and No. 195 overall player nationally in the 2027 class, picked the Irish over fellow finalist Oregon.
PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

"I wanted to get coached by Coach Partridge," Parks told *Blue & Gold Illustrated*. "He's a great coach. I met him back in January. Great person, great coach at the same time."

His relationship with Freeman goes even further back, dating to his first visit to campus during the spring of his freshman year in 2023.

"And Coach Freeman," Parks continued. "Him not even talking about football, but just life in general. Just checking up on me. I was just having simple conversations about different things. I think those are two reasons why I chose Notre Dame."

Parks' family was on board with his decision, too. They bought into Freeman's vision for the program and Partridge's developmental plan.

According to Parks, his parents' perspective became the biggest deciding factor down the stretch. They emphasized the benefits of the Notre Dame network and how it could help him find success after football. They also stressed the importance of having a familiar support system in South Bend.

"Family is close," he said. "Even without them being there with me, the Notre Dame fan base would still treat me like I'm one of their own. That was a big reason for them."

Still, while Parks' family made their case, the final decision belonged to him.

"It was my decision at the end of the day," he said. "It was just my decision."

Parks' support system also includes two prominent Notre Dame figures.

His godfather is Chris Zorich, a former Notre Dame unanimous All-America defensive lineman who played for the program from 1987-90. Before becoming one of the most decorated defensive linemen in program history, Zorich attended Chicago Vocational School with Parks' father, Marlon.

Parks is also cousins with former Irish running back Tony Jones Jr., who played at Notre Dame from 2016-19.

Because of those connections and several strong trips to campus early in the process, Parks initially thought he would commit to the Irish early in his recruitment. Notre Dame gave him the opportunity to do so when it offered him a scholarship during its St. Patrick's Day-themed Pot of Gold Day recruiting event on March 17, 2025.

However, that spring, Parks emerged as a national recruit. His offer sheet exploded to include more than 40 other Power Four programs by the end of his junior year. He also visited Ohio State, Miami, Tennessee, LSU, Michigan, Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin during the process.

Oregon emerged as the school that made the strongest push and ultimately made his decision the most difficult.

After months of uncertainty, Notre Dame won out because of the relationships Parks built with the program. As long as Freeman and Partridge remain in South Bend, Parks has no doubts about the school he chose.

"Ten out of 10," Parks said when asked how confident he is in his decision. "Like, a thousand percent." ✦

Five-Star Edge Saw His Future At Notre Dame

BY KYLE KELLY

Abraham Sesay did not see a need to let his recruitment linger any longer.

On June 16, Sesay — Rivals' No. 3 player in Pennsylvania, and No. 2 edge and No. 15 overall player in the 2027 class — revealed his pledge to play for Notre Dame just two days after his official visit concluded. The Exton (Pa.) Downingtown East standout also officially visited LSU in May.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
ABRAHAM SESAY

Sesay chose the Irish over 35 schools, including a group of finalists that featured Duke and Florida State. He also held offers from programs like Ohio State, Miami, Southern Cal, Oregon, Michigan and Georgia. The Irish won out because of everything they could offer Sesay on and off the field.

"I felt like it was the place for me," Sesay told *Blue & Gold Illustrated*. "Notre Dame will maximize my success on and off the field. Being a part of what they're building and what they've already established will benefit me and my family. I'm very excited to get to work."

Notre Dame made its move for Sesay by offering him Nov. 4 toward the end of his dominant junior season. The 6-foot-4½, 225-pounder self-reported at least 80 tackles and 13 sacks. He earned first-team all-state honors at defensive end for his efforts. He was also named first-team all-league and all-county at defensive end and tight end.

After Sesay visited campus for the first time for the Syracuse game Nov. 22, he noted that the Irish had established themselves as the frontrunner in his recruitment. However, it ultimately took two more trips to campus — one in April and another in June — for him to solidify his decision.

Rivals ranks Sesay as the country's No. 2 edge and No. 15 overall player in the 2027 class.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

Getting to spend time with the players rather than just watching them was the last box that needed to be checked.

"Notre Dame has always been at the forefront of my recruitment," he said. "Hanging out with the players and being able to bond with them was amazing. I really felt like I fit in."

If Sesay maintains his ranking when he signs with the Irish in December, he will become the third five-star edge Freeman's program has added from the high school ranks.

In the 2026 class, the Irish signed Rodney Dunham, Rivals' No. 3 edge and No. 8 overall player nationally. Freeman also added five-star Bryce Young in the 2025 cycle, the No. 6 edge and No. 24 overall player, according to 247Sports. Dunham and Young both played their high school football in North Carolina and were considered the top prospect in the state in their respective classes.

After Sesay's Notre Dame official visit, he revealed to *Blue & Gold Illustrated* that the Irish coaching staff compared him to Young.

"They really have me similar to Bryce Young," he said. "To the position he plays and how I am using my length and explosive closure off the ball to get out there. That's really what they see me as — rushing the passer, but being able to stop the run. Being able to play all four downs."

Sesay is one of three edge players on Notre Dame's 2027 commit list, joining Ramsey (N.J.) Don Bosco Prep four-star Aidan O'Neil and Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy four-star Jackson Vaughn. According to Rivals, O'Neil and Vaughn are the 13th- and 16th-ranked prospects at their position, as well as the Nos. 113 and 148 overall players nationally.

With a loaded depth chart, Notre Dame will surely see programs try to sway Sesay away. But those attempts are expected to fall short. He remains steadfast in his pledge to the Irish.

"I'm not someone to go against my word," he said. "The word commitment is a commitment. I gave them my word and told them I'd be committing to the University of Notre Dame, and I'm going to keep my word." ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"Abraham Sesay has a good developmental frame for the position, and he's one who will add more good weight to his frame. He's over 6-5 and has good length with 33.5-inch arms and big hands. Physically, he checks the boxes.

"We love his natural movement skills. He plays with excellent bend. He can turn the corner and has very good curvilinear movement. From a pure pass rush standpoint, he's one of the more gifted edge prospects in the 2027 cycle. You saw that as a junior with 13 sacks, and the film is very strong.

"This is a really big get for Notre Dame. If he continues this rate of improvement, Sesay could push to be the top edge prospect in the cycle. He's going to be in the discussion at the very minimum. They're adding an elite prospect at a premium position. He gives Notre Dame another high-upside pass rusher, and these guys don't grow on trees."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Five-Star Offensive Lineman Chooses Notre Dame Over The SEC

BY MIKE SINGER

COMMITMENT PROFILE
ALBERT SIMIEN

Simien, who is Rivals' No. 2 interior offensive lineman and No. 9 overall prospect in the country, committed to Notre Dame over Texas A&M and in-state LSU.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

Blue & Gold Illustrated spoke with Lake Charles (La.) Sam Houston class of 2027 offensive lineman Albert Simien in January after an Under Armour All-America Game practice, and the vibe from the interview was that the Irish had to make up a lot of ground on the SEC programs he was considering.

If you would've told him at that point that he'd end up committing to Notre Dame several months later, he would have been dumbfounded.

"That would definitely have surprised me," Simien told *BGI*. "At that time, I was gung-ho about staying close to home."

Texas A&M was the longtime favorite to land Simien, with insider predictions first being logged for him to pick the Aggies last fall. And after his A&M official visit the weekend of May 31, he told Rivals that the Aggies still held the lead. LSU, the in-state school, was another mainstay in his recruitment.

The five-star prospect announced his pledge to the Fighting Irish live on ESPN's "SportsCenter" on June 26. He visited Notre Dame three times. Simien saw the Irish knock off North Carolina State last October and returned for junior day in March. He officially visited June 19-21, leading to his commitment.

His younger sister, who is entering high school, gave Albert her blessing to leave the South for college, opening the door for the Fighting Irish to make a move.

"She told me that I will find ways to come back and see her dance performances," Simien said. "If distance isn't a factor, why wouldn't I go to one of the top schools academics-wise? And their great football is a plus."

Simien officially visited LSU, Texas A&M, Nebraska and Notre Dame, in that order. Shortly after his trip to South Bend, he knew it was the school he wanted to attend. But he kept suspense going with his future head coach.

"I told Coach [Marcus] Freeman about two hours before my announcement," Simien said.

Freeman had to sweat out the decision, but it was all worth it.

"He was messing with me before my official visit, saying that they got another O-line commit and they had to cancel my visit," Simien recalled with a laugh. "I had to get him back. I had to keep it suspenseful. It was all fun.

"That's just our relationship. I've been talking with him way more than with other head coaches that were recruiting me. We talk all the time about life — not just football.

"I told him that Notre Dame was the place for me, and he was really excited."

It would be a surprise if other programs stopped recruiting Simien, the No. 2 interior lineman and No. 9 overall player nationally per Rivals. However, he doesn't appear to be keeping his recruitment open.

"I'm very confident in my decision," said Simien, who plans to return for a few home games this fall. "If Notre Dame isn't playing, I'm not watching. That's all I've got to say."

Simien graduates from Sam Houston this winter and will enroll early at Notre Dame. He'll begin his career as an interior player, but a move to tackle is not out of the realm of possibility.

"I'll start out at guard to get introduced to college football, and then they'll experiment with me to see if tackle will work," he said.

Simien played in the 2026 Under Armour All-American Game and Polynesian Bowl, both of which now allow high school juniors to participate. He was named to the 2024 and 2025 American Press All-Southwest Louisiana Big School Team and made the 2025 Louisiana Football Coaches Association 5A first-team all-state squad. Simien was picked for the 2024 Louisiana District 5A-3 team following his sophomore season.

He also plays for the Sam Houston basketball team and participates in track and field. ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"Albert Simien is dominant on Friday nights. He lines up at left tackle for his high school, and there's positional versatility with Simien. He could play any of the five offensive line positions in college given his build. He's not the tallest offensive lineman at around 6-3, but he has 34-plus-inch arms, and that length can compensate and allow him to line up at tackle if needed.

"The first thing that sticks out when you watch him play is that he is a violent, aggressive blocker. He might have more pancakes on his film than anyone else in the 2027 cycle. He looks to finish and put defenders in the dirt on every play."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Reclassifying Four-Star Edge From New Jersey Picks Irish

BY MIKE SINGER

After accumulating 52 scholarship offers, Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic class of 2027 edge Jackson Vaughn made his

COMMITMENT PROFILE
JACKSON VAUGHN

choice. The 6-foot-3, 220-pound four-star prospect announced his commitment to Notre Dame May 26, picking Marcus Freeman's program over Auburn, LSU, Miami and South Carolina.

"It made the most sense for me and where I want to be in life," Vaughn told *Blue & Gold Illustrated* about choosing the Fighting Irish. "There's great football at Notre Dame, but there are a lot of places that have great football. The things outside of football are what set Notre Dame apart and why it's the school for me."

Notre Dame has long been considered one of the top programs — if not the No. 1 school to beat — in Vaughn's recruitment since he earned the offer last June during the staff's Irish Invasion camp. He was one of the top overall performers on the day according to *Blue & Gold Illustrated*.

He returned to campus three months later to see the Irish in prime time against Texas A&M, and made it back to South Bend twice in the spring. Vaughn was on campus March 21 and April 25 for junior day and the Blue-Gold Game, respectively.

Vaughn noted that his Notre Dame game-day visit last year solidified the Irish as the team to beat, and his trip for the spring game is when he knew he'd end up committing to the Irish. He first informed Freeman and defensive line coach Charlie Partridge of his decision.

"They were all excited," Vaughn said. "They were telling me that in a few years, they'll be in the green room with me, waiting for me to get drafted and how this is one of the best decisions I've made in my life."

Vaughn was Partridge's third commitment of the class, joining Ramsey (N.J.) Don Bosco Prep edge Aidan O'Neil and Chicago St. Patrick defensive lineman David Folorunsho.

Vaughn will enroll at Notre Dame in January.

"I'm ready to go. I'm happy that the recruiting part is over," he said. "I'm blessed to be put in this position."

Vaughn was originally a class of 2028 prospect, but on April 27, Rivals' Hayes Fawcett reported that Vaughn would be reclassifying to the 2027 cycle. With the immense talent Vaughn possesses, this change didn't deter any of his top programs. In fact, Notre Dame and others were "open to it and welcomed it."

Al Washington was Notre Dame's defensive line coach when the Irish offered Vaughn, but after Partridge was hired to replace him earlier this year, they hit it off.

"It's been great. We have a lot in common," Vaughn said. "We could talk ball all day. It's been awesome getting to know him."

Vaughn had a strong 11-game 2025 campaign, posting 40 stops, 12 tackles for loss, 8 sacks and 3 pass deflections. He recorded 8 sacks during his freshman season in 2024 as well, along with 10.5 tackles for loss, 3 pass deflections and 1 forced fumble, helping Bergen Catholic capture the New Jersey Non-Public A state championship.

"I'm a guy who can get after the quarterback," Vaughn said. "I bring high energy, good football awareness and a dog mentality."

Vaughn earned first-team Sophomore All-America honors from both Rivals and MaxPreps in 2025 after previously being named a 2024 Freshman All-American by both outlets.

Vaughn, who is transferring from Bergen Catholic to Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy for his senior season, is listed as the No. 17 player in Florida, and the No. 16 edge and No. 149 overall prospect nationally in the Rivals Industry Ranking.

He's been invited to participate in the 2027 Under Armour All-America Game, the 2027 Navy All-American Bowl and the 2027 Polynesian Bowl.

Vaughn's older brother, Noah, is a running back at Virginia. ✦

Last season, Vaughn totaled 40 stops, 12 tackles for loss and 8 sacks en route to earning Rivals and MaxPreps Sophomore All-America honors.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

FILM ANALYSIS

"For a reclassification prospect, [Jackson] Vaughn has advanced know-how as a pass rusher. You have to start off with his polish and combination of coordination and movement skills in pass-rush situations. He has outstanding bend and really understands leverage. Vaughn knows how to attack offensive tackles. He stays low, has quick hands, and you can tell he's been coached well. ...

"He'll continue to get bigger and stronger and will have to do that quicker with him reclassifying, but from an age perspective, he was older for his grade in 2028. So he's reclassifying into the correct grade age-wise.

"It's a really nice get for Notre Dame, and one who Irish fans who are familiar with after his strong showing at Notre Dame's camp last year."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Notre Dame Kicks Off 2028 Class With A Pledge From Another Specialist

BY MIKE SINGER

COMMITMENT PROFILE
OWEN DAVIES

For the second recruiting cycle in a row, Notre Dame's class started with a specialist.

In the 2027 class, it was long snapper Sean Kraft from Swannanoa (N.C.) Asheville Christian Academy, who picked the Irish before his junior season. For the 2028 cycle, Brentwood (Tenn.) Academy kicker Owen Davies was the first to jump in the boat.

Davies, whom Kohl's Kicking ranks as the No. 2 kicker in the 2028 class, had several powerhouse programs pursuing him, but the only schools from which he publicly announced scholarship offers were Notre Dame and Tennessee.

"It wasn't even a question for me," Davies told *Blue & Gold Illustrated* about his decision to pick the Fighting Irish. "I visited six schools last fall and a few more in the spring. The second I went to Notre Dame, I realized that there was nothing like it — from the coaching staff to the way they run their program.

"It was the first school to get me thinking about life after football, and I really got along with Coach [Marty] Biagi. I like how he runs his specialist room."

When the 6-foot, 190-pound Davies privately informed Biagi, who enters his fourth season as Notre Dame's special teams coordinator, of his commitment June 2, it didn't catch him by surprise. It was something the two parties had been discussing as a possibility for a couple of months.

Davies, the No. 2 kicker in the 2028 class per Kohl's Kicking, picked Notre Dame over Tennessee.

PHOTO COURTESY KOHL'S KICKING PROFESSIONAL CAMPS

Davies first visited Notre Dame April 11 to watch a spring practice, and he returned two weeks later for the Blue-Gold Game. He made his third trip to South Bend June 2, where he participated in a prospect camp and earned his scholarship offer from Notre Dame.

Davies didn't feel any pressure going into the camp with an offer on the line.

"It felt more like a practice," Davies said. "Coach Biagi made it clear they had already seen everything they wanted from me. It was more of a practice to get with Sean Kraft, the long snapper commit, and get work with him. It wasn't high pressure, but at the same time, it was a little bit because it was their first time seeing me kick in person."

Davies came into the camp confidently after a strong kicking workout a couple of days prior and clearly did well, earning the offer. He committed privately to Biagi and the staff later that evening and announced his decision publicly June 10.

Soccer was Davies' first love. He started playing the sport as a young boy and played throughout his youth. He started kicking a football in middle school, but the majority of his focus remained on the pitch rather than the gridiron. That changed in December of his freshman year when he performed well at the Kohl's Professional Camps Midwest Winter Showcase.

"I started thinking about shifting my focus toward football because it would be better for the long term," he said.

Davies stopped playing soccer as a sophomore to give his full attention to football, a move that clearly worked out.

His father, Gareth, was born and raised in Durban, South Africa, and moved to the San Diego area for work in 2006, where he met his wife, Dusti. Owen, the oldest of their three children, was born in Carlsbad, Calif., and the Davies family moved to Tennessee in 2019.

Davies transferred from Brentwood High to Brentwood Academy following his freshman season, forcing him to sit out his sophomore season in 2025.

Though Notre Dame has primarily relied on graduate transfers to fill the starting place-kicker role under Biagi, the Irish have also aggressively recruited kickers. Notre Dame signed scholarship kickers out of high school in back-to-back classes: Erik Schmidt in 2025 and Micah Drescher in 2026.

"I knew from the first second I stepped foot at Notre Dame that it was different and where I wanted to be," Davies said. "It was pretty straightforward. I didn't want to wait and draw things out. I was ready to get it done, play my high school season and get ready for college in a couple of years." ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"Owen Davies is a standout specialist in the class of 2028, currently developing his talent under the elite instruction of coach James Wilhoit. Based in Brentwood, Tennessee, Davies has quickly established himself as a top prospect, combining technical precision with the leg strength necessary to compete at the collegiate level.

"He made his mark at the December 2025 Kohl's Midwest Winter Showcase by finishing as one of the camp's strongest performers. He won the kickoff competition, demonstrating impressive skills with a top ball of 69 yards and a hang time of 4.1 seconds, while earning 15 points in field goal charting and posting 109.45 points in kickoffs."

— Kohl's Kicking Professional Camps

Legacy Recruit Surprises Irish Nation With Early Pledge

BY MIKE SINGER

After Julius Jones Jr. announced his commitment to Notre Dame on ESPN June 22, show host Pat McAfee indicated that the new Irish pledge might get a surprise before asking whether Julius' younger brother, Andre, had anything to share himself.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
ANDRE JONES

Moments later, Andre — a class of 2028 defensive back recruit from Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) St. Thomas Aquinas — announced his commitment to the Fighting Irish as well.

The commitment was not a surprise — they discussed the possibility of committing together for weeks, according to Andre. Nonetheless, it was a special moment for the entire Jones family.

"Probably sometime in May, and I told him and my parents that Notre Dame was where I wanted to be," Jones told *Blue & Gold Illustrated*. "What's a better time to do it than with him?"

Notre Dame offered the younger Jones, the No. 24 safety and No. 269 overall player nationally in the junior class per Rivals, in April during his second campus visit. He also visited last fall for the Texas A&M game. Jones committed to the Fighting Irish over Florida State, Georgia Tech, Penn State, Texas A&M and others.

"It starts with the coaches," Jones said about committing to Notre Dame. "Every coach in the program really cares about their players and wants to win big games for Notre Dame.

"Coach [Aaron] Henry and Coach J-Cod [Jevaughn Codlin] are two great coaches. Coach Henry has developed a lot of great players, and Coach [Marcus] Freeman is an amazing leader. It's where I want to be."

After the Irish offered Jones in the spring, it was just a matter of time before he committed.

"The visit had a big impact on me," Jones explained. "I loved the connection I felt with the team and the entire staff."

He picked Notre Dame because of his interest in the school and how the staff recruited him. However, his brother trending toward the Irish for several months and their father, Julius Jones Sr., being a former Irish star running back certainly helped.

Jones, the son of former Irish running back Julius Jones Sr., committed to Notre Dame June 22, moments after his older brother Julius Jones Jr. did so live on ESPN.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

"I've been recruited by some very good programs, and it's been clear to me, too," Jones said. "If Notre Dame wasn't for me, I wouldn't have committed. It's not like it was my only offer. But they showed me that they wanted me, and the proof is in the pudding with what they produce with defensive backs."

Jones gave the Notre Dame staff his private commitment during the first day of his brother's official visit on June 19. They had a meeting with Freeman, and at the end of it, Andre gave the Fighting Irish head coach the news.

"He was really happy," Jones recalled. "I let Coach Henry and Coach J-Cod know also, and they were all fired up. I think they expected me to commit, but not that early. Everyone was excited for me."

As a sophomore in 2025, Jones played in 13 contests, recording 37 tackles, 1 interception and 4 passes broken up in a loaded St. Thomas Aquinas secondary. He's been on the Raiders' last two 5A Florida state championship teams.

Jones feels comfortable with how he'll be utilized in Notre Dame's defensive scheme.

"They'll use me at nickel and safety, which is the same way I'm used at St. Thomas," he said. "I'm versatile and can work anywhere to get on the field as fast as I can."

Notre Dame hasn't signed a football player from St. Thomas Aquinas since the 2017 class when linebacker Drew White picked the Irish. That streak will end in the 2027 cycle with Jones and safety Zayden Gamble, who is also pledged to the Irish.

Jones will sign with the Irish in the 2028 class, and Notre Dame hopes to keep the pipeline open.

"I'm surprised that it's been so long," he said. "We'll definitely have more people coming from St. Thomas." ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"Andre Jones is a dependable defensive back with extended experience at a young age. He sorts out what he's seeing quickly and arrives at the ball with urgency. He can cover up mistakes by his fellow defenders. Jones possesses versatility as a safety prospect. He can play in the box, line up in the slot or stand guard on the back end. He's able to do so because his athleticism and physicality allow him to match up with players of different sizes and speeds.

"Jones shrinks the ground between him and the ball in a hurry. When he's diagnosed the play, he doesn't hesitate in breaking on an intended receiver or a ball carrier. That allows him to break up passes with his hands or with a big hit."

— *Blue & Gold Illustrated* staff writer Tyler James

Elite 2028 Edge Picks Notre Dame Over Oregon And Texas A&M

BY MIKE SINGER

Notre Dame had the No. 2-ranked class in the 2027 cycle as of Aug. 3, and the Irish's 2028 class is off to a strong start. Head coach Marcus Freeman's program got a major boost July 27.

COMMITMENT PROFILE
DARIEON PRESCOTT

Bolingbrook (Ill.) High's Darieon Prescott — No. 1 prospect in Illinois, and the No. 4 edge and No. 16 overall prospect nationally according to the 2028 Rivals Industry Ranking — announced his commitment to Notre Dame over Oregon and Texas A&M live on the "Pat McAfee Show." Before going public with his decision, Prescott spoke to *Blue & Gold Illustrated* about picking the Fighting Irish.

"I love Notre Dame," Prescott said. "I love everything about it — the environment, the intensity they play with during practice and games, the coaching staff and the players. I enjoy everything about Notre Dame.

"I love how highly they value academics and how strong the culture is. At Bolingbrook, we talk about responsibility, accountability and culture, and I feel that Notre Dame has the same motto. Whether it's academics, football or anything, Notre Dame carries itself really well."

Prescott earned his first offer from Illinois in January 2025, and Notre Dame extended a scholarship to him in June 2025. He visited for Fighting Irish home games last fall and returned for a spring practice March 28. Prescott's fourth visit to campus was June 18.

More than 30 college programs have offered Prescott a scholarship, including Alabama, Florida, LSU, Ohio State, Penn State and Tennessee.

The entire Notre Dame staff, including Freeman, defensive line coach Charlie Partridge, defensive line assistants Nick Sebastian and Chase Jones, all played an important role in helping Prescott decide to commit before his junior season.

"Notre Dame was one of my first big offers, and they were coming off their national championship run," he said. "They showed me how much respect they have for me as a player and a person. Notre Dame recruited me hard; they reached out to me every single day. Whenever I visited, they treated me like family.

"I connected well with all the coaches. On my last visit, I talked with Coach Partridge for hours, and I felt a strong bond with him. We have the same mindset when it comes to the game of football."

Prescott — a 6-foot-4, 255-pound edge — was named a second-team Sophomore All- American by Rivals after compiling 65 stops, 14 tackles for loss, 5 sacks and 26 quarterback pressures last fall.

PHOTO BY KYLE KELLY

Notre Dame had long been a contender in Prescott's recruitment, and the Irish became the clear leader during his visit last month.

"It was definitely during that conversation with Coach Partridge," Prescott said when asked when it clicked with him that he wanted to commit. "We were talking for a long time."

Other programs will likely continue to recruit Prescott because he committed so early in the process, but the Irish have his full attention moving forward.

"I'm focused on Notre Dame," said Prescott, who will visit South Bend multiple times this fall. "Being one of the top players in the 2028 class, I wanted to set the tone. God helped show me that it was the right time to commit."

During his sophomore season, Prescott recorded 65 stops, 14 tackles for loss, 5 sacks, 8 passes broken up, 3 forced fumbles, 2 fumble recoveries, 26 quarterback pressures and 2 blocked kicks on his way to being named a second-team Sophomore All-American by Rivals.

"On the field, I bring high energy, and I've been a captain since I was a freshman," Prescott said. "Going to Notre Dame, I can bring that same presence. A lot of my coaches say that I'm a better person than I am a player, and I'm a pretty good player."

Prescott had a strong freshman season as well, being named to the 2024 MaxPreps Freshman All-America Team. He posted 66 tackles, 9 stops for loss, 5 sacks, 7 passes broken up, 2 forced fumbles, 1 interception, 27 quarterback pressures and 2 blocked kicks. ✦

FILM ANALYSIS

"Darieon Prescott is a physically imposing edge prospect who has had a lot of growth and development over the past year. ...

"This is a big get for Notre Dame. With him already being 250 pounds, where he plays long term is up in the air. If he gets bigger and bigger, he could slide inside. There's potential position versatility. We saw him work on the edge and inside at the Under Armour Chicago camp, and he was good at both spots.

"Prescott projects as a high upside player on the defensive front for Notre Dame. The Irish have been landing big-time prospects from Chicago, particularly on the defensive front. Notre Dame is recruiting the defensive front as well as anyone in college football, and adding Prescott to that group only furthers that trend."

— Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power

Class Of 2027 Scholarship Offer Master List

Quarterback
Champ Monds, ★★★★, 6-2½, 219, Vero Beach, Fla. (Vero Beach)

Running Back
Isaiah Rogers, ★★★★, 5-10, 190, Springfield, Mass. (Springfield Central)
Lathan Whisenton, ★★★★, 5-11, 195, Waco, Texas (Midway)

Wide Receiver
Jackson Coleman, ★★★, 6-3, 195, Highlands Ranch, Colo. (Valor Christian)
Julius Jones Jr., ★★★★, 5-11, 160, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (St. Thomas Aquinas)

Tight End
Titus Hawk, ★★★★, 6-6½, 220, Choctaw, Okla. (Choctaw)

Offensive Line
Richie Flanigan, ★★★★, 6-3½, 285, Green Bay, Wis. (Notre Dame de la Baie Academy)
James Halter, ★★★★, 6-5, 268, Pittsburgh (Central Catholic)
Jackson Hill, ★★★, 6-6½, 300, West Hills, Calif. (Chaminade)^
Oluwasemilore Olubobola, ★★★★★, 6-6, 295, Jersey City, New Jersey (St. Peter's Prep)
Albert Simien, ★★★★★, 6-3, 295, Lake Charles, La. (Sam Houston)

Defensive End
Aidan O'Neil, ★★★★, 6-5, 250, Ramsey, N.J. (Don Bosco Prep)
Abraham Sesay, ★★★★★, 6-4½, 225, Exton, Pa. (Downingtown East)
Jackson Vaughn, ★★★★, 6-3, 220, Bradenton, Fla. (IMG Academy)

Defensive Tackle
Segun Alexander, ★★★★, 6-2, 300, Rabun Gap, Ga. (Nacoochee School))
David Folorunsho, ★★★★★, 6-3, 285, Chicago (St. Patrick)
Brayden Parks, ★★★★, 6-0¾, 308, Chicago (Brother Rice)

Linebacker
Kaden Henderson, ★★★★, 6-0½, 225, Tampa, Fla. (Jesuit) — committed to Texas A&M
Roman Igwebuike, ★★★★, 6-3, 220, Chicago (Mount Carmel)

Cornerback
Ace Alston, ★★★★, 5-11, 175, Cincinnati (Anderson)
Xavier Hasan, ★★★★, 5-11, 190, Raleigh, N.C. (Cardinal Gibbons)

Safety
Zayden Gamble, ★★★★, 5-11, 185, Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (St. Thomas Aquinas)
John Gay III, ★★★, 6-2, 180, Hollywood, Fla. (Chaminade-Madonna Prep)

Athletes
None

Long Snapper
Sean Kraft, ★★★, 6-4, 215, Swannanoa, N.C. (Asheville Christian Academy)

Star ratings are from Rivals as of Aug. 4
^ Offered by Notre Dame between May 5 and Aug. 4
*Commitments in **bold italics***

2027 Master List Changes

Prospects Committed: DT Segun Alexander of Rabun Gap, Ga.; DT David Folorunsho of Chicago; LB Roman Igwebuike of Chicago; WR Julius Jones of Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; OL Jackson Hill of West Hills, Calif.; OL Oluwasemilore Olubobola of Jersey City, N.J.; DT Brayden Parks of Chicago; DE Abraham Sesay of Exton, Pa.; OL Albert Simien of Lake Charles, La.; and DE Jackson Vaughn of Bradenton, Fla..

Prospects Decommitted: LB Amarri Irvin of Bradenton, Fla. (flipped to Virginia Tech).

Prospects Removed: WR Quentin Burrell of Chicago (committed to Michigan); WR Cade Cooper of Malvern, Pa. (committed to LSU); WR Osani Gayles of Bradenton, Fla. (committed to Alabama); WR Tyler Fryman of Fort Mitchell, Ky. (committed to Kentucky); WR Matthew Gregory of Pottstown, Pa. (committed to UCLA); WR Myles McAfee of Severn, Md. (committed to Maryland); WR Xavier Sabb of Glassboro, N.J. (committed to Oregon); WR Trenton Yancey of Duncanville, Texas (committed to Purdue); TE Malik Howard of Oak Ridge, Tenn. (committed to Tennessee); TE Cooper Terwilliger of Pierre, S.D. (committed to Penn State); OL Luke Starcevic of Kindred, N.D. (committed to Clemson); OL Layton von Brandt of Middletown, Del. (committed to Auburn); OL Cameron Wagner of Saint Joseph, Ill. (committed to Oregon); DE Ifeanyi Emedobi of Fort Wayne, Ind. (committed to Michigan); DE Griff Galloway of Charlotte, N.C. (committed to Kentucky);

continues on next page

Five-star linebacker Kaden Henderson of Tampa (Fla.) Jesuit picked Texas A&M over Notre Dame in June, but the Fighting Irish haven't given up on trying to flip him this fall.

PHOTO COURTESY RIVALS

2027 RIVALS INDUSTRY TEAM RECRUITING RANKINGS

As of Aug. 4

Rk.	School	Commits
1.	Texas A&M	26
2.	***Notre Dame***	***23***
3.	Miami	21
4.	Oregon	24
5.	Ohio State	19
6.	Texas	22
7.	Oklahoma	27
8.	Florida	25
9.	Texas Tech	17
10.	LSU	16

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PERSONALS

PRAYER TO THE BLESSED MOTHER - Oh, most beautiful flower of Mount Carmel, fruitful vine, splendor of Heaven. Blessed Mother of the Son of God; Immaculate Virgin, assist me in this necessity. Oh, Star of the Sea, help me and show me you are my Mother. Oh, Holy Mary, Mother of God, Queen of Heaven and Earth, I humbly beseech you from the bottom of my heart to succour me in my necessity. There are none that can withstand your power. Oh, Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee. (3 times). Holy Mary, I place this prayer in your hands. (3 times). Sweet Mother I place this cause in your hands. (3 times). Thank you for your mercy to me and mine. Amen. This prayer must be said for 3 days and after 3 days your request will be granted and the prayer must be published. Thank you. S.G.

2027 Master List Changes

continued from previous page

DE Chaz Gray of Montvale, N.J. (committed to Washington); DE KJ Green of Stone Mountain, Ga. (committed to LSU); DE Santana Harvey of Lakeland, Fla. (committed to Clemson); DE Rion Jackson of Annapolis, Md. (committed to Auburn); DE Wyatt Smith of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (committed to Ohio State); DE Ty Tautolo (no longer considering Notre Dame); DE Chris Whitehead Jr. (committed to LSU); DE Esa Wittingburg of East Orange, N.J. (committed to Wake Forest); DT Tyler Alexander of West Palm Beach, Fla. (committed to Texas); DT Ezekiel Ayangbile of Houston (committed to Miami); DT Marcus Fakatou of Chatsworth, Calif. (committed to Ohio State); DT Kyng Golston of Valliant, Okla. (committed to Tulsa); DT Jaderian Jones of Dallas (committed to California); DT Sam LeJeune of Poplarville, Miss. (committed to Florida State); DT Jaylen Mercer of Cincinnati (committed to Kentucky); DT Xavier Muhammad of Houston (committed to Michigan); DT Tevita Nonu of Seattle (committed to Washington); Alifeleti Tuihalamaka of Westlake Village, Calif. (committed to Southern Cal); LB James Austin of Tyrone, Ga. (committed to Cincinnati); LB Brayton Feister of Massillon, Ohio (no longer considering Notre Dame); LB Sean Fox of Indianapolis (committed to Kentucky); LB Noah Glover of Haymarket, Va. (committed to Miami); LB Jake Godfree of Lawrenceville, Ga. (committed to NC State); LB Joakim Gouda of Powder Springs, Ga. (committed to Georgia); LB Deion Jackson of Vero Beach, Fla. (no longer considering Notre Dame); LB Liufau Loumoli of Bradenton, Fla. (no longer considering Notre Dame); LB Isaiah Phelps of Oxnard, Calif. (committed to San Diego State); LB AJ Randle Jr. of Garner, N.C. (committed to Miami); LB Toa Satele of Miliani, Hawai'i (committed to Oregon); LB Tate Wallace of Iowa City, Iowa (committed to Minnesota); CB Jaden Carey of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. (committed to Ohio State); CB Censere Gaylord of Bradenton, Fla. (committed to Washington); CB Tavares Harrington of Chicago (committed to Michigan); CB Jailen Hill of Opa Locka, Fla. (committed to Nebraska); CB Larry Moon of Bradenton, Fla. (committed to Georgia Tech); CB Brandon Sherrard of Pearland, Texas (committed to Texas); CB Monsanna Torbert of Cincinnati (committed to Michigan); CB Duvay Williams of Chatsworth, Calif. (committed to California); S Alan Blackshere of Miami (committed to Connecticut); S Andre Hyppolite of Miami (committed to Miami); CB Greedy James of Manvel, Texas (committed to LSU); S Jaylyn Jones of Hollywood, Fla. (stuck with Miami commitment); S Jaden Walk Green of Corona, Calif. (committed to Washington); and S Gavin Williams of La Verne, Calif. (committed to Southern Cal).

RECRUITING NOTES

• With December's early signing period four months away, head coach Marcus Freeman's program is eyeing another major achievement. The Irish, who have the No. 2 class nationally, are positioned to sign back-to-back top-five recruiting classes for the first time since it had three straight from 2006-08.

Before Freeman signed the No. 2 class in 2026, Notre Dame had landed just one other top-five recruiting class since 2008: the No. 4 class in 2013. Now, Freeman has Notre Dame in position to sign two straight.

Considering Southern Cal, which signed the No. 1 class last cycle, currently sits at No. 13 nationally and Texas A&M, which currently holds the No. 1 class, finished No. 8 last year, Notre Dame has a strong case as the nation's best recruiting program over the last two cycles.

• When Rivals updated its 2027 class player rankings July 20, several Notre Dame commits were big risers, including two recruits who reclassified from 2028 to 2027.

Four-star defensive lineman Segun Alexander and four-star edge rusher Jackson Vaughn debuted in the 2027 Rivals300 at Nos. 192 and 269, respectively. The rankings represented a significant accomplishment because evaluating reclassified prospects is one of the most difficult parts of the process.

"You're taking a prospect who is in one pool of younger prospects and putting them in a pool that's a lot more competitive," Rivals director of scouting and rankings Charles Power said.

Still, Alexander and Vaughn were able to successfully state their case as two of the top 300 players in the class.

Before the update, Rivals ranked Alexander as the nation's No. 51 defensive lineman. Now, the 6-foot-2, 300-pounder is the No. 23 prospect at his position in addition to being the No. 192 overall player in the class. Power credited verified measurables and a fresh evaluation of Alexander's film for the jump.

"Going back and watching that D-line group, I feel like he stacks up well there too," Power said. "Super athletic. He was productive. He's a 10-plus sack guy. He creates a pass rush on the interior. And the highlights in game film pop. I watched a couple of his games, just having some more time to study him. I don't think we evaluated him at length because of him reclassifying between both updates — it may have been since last fall.

"We had the full sample for us to go through. We watched a couple of his games against high-quality competition, like Grayson and some of those top teams. … I like him, too."

Against Loganville (Ga.) Grayson, ranked No. 11 nationally and No. 3 in Georgia entering the 2026 season, Alexander totaled 4 tackles (3 solo) and 2 tackles for loss. He finished his junior season with 36 stops, 18 for loss, 13 sacks, 19 quarterback hurries, 1 forced fumble and 1 fumble recovery in 11 games.

Power is equally intrigued by Vaughn's potential after two promising seasons at Oradell (N.J.) Bergen Catholic.

"Jackson Vaughn is very impressive," Power said. "He's a guy who plays with a lot of bend. He probably moves in game settings and camp settings probably faster than he has tested in terms of combine situations.

"I think he's a guy who is certainly going to push to be a blue chipper for us. There's certainly some things that he can continue adding to his game. But he's well-built, 6-foot-3, 6-foot-3½, 230 pounds. Plays good competition at Bergen Catholic.

"When you look at the skill set, his movement patterns and his ability to set up counters, his bend, that all projects well. I like Jackson Vaughn."

As a sophomore in 2025, Vaughn collected 40 tackles (14 solo), 12 stops for loss, 8 sacks and 3 passes broken up.

• Vaughn will play his senior season in 2026 elsewhere. On July 28, he announced his transfer to Bradenton (Fla.) IMG Academy. While Vaughn would have preferred to finish his high school career at Bergen Catholic, transferring to IMG Academy will allow him to graduate in 2027 and enroll at Notre Dame next year instead of waiting until 2028.

The 6-foot-3, 220-pound edge rusher announced his verbal commitment to the Fighting Irish May 26, about one month after revealing his reclassification. Vaughn ultimately chose Notre Dame over South Carolina, Auburn, LSU and Miami. However, he also received offers from programs like Alabama, Georgia, Michigan, Ohio State, Oregon, Texas, Texas A&M and Southern Cal.

Though Notre Dame has not had much success recruiting IMG Academy prospects over the last decade, Vaughn remains fully committed to Marcus Freeman's program.

If Vaughn signs with Notre Dame as expected in December, he will become the first IMG Academy graduate to join the Irish since four-star cornerback Houston Griffith in 2018. Notre Dame also previously held commitments from four-star offensive lineman Greg Crippen (2021) and four-star linebacker Amarri Irvin (2027). However, both players ultimately backed off their pledges and committed to Michigan and Virginia Tech, respectively.

— Kyle Kelly

Irish Not Hiding From Past In Effort To Change Future

BY JACK SOBLE

Ask anyone on the 2025-26 Notre Dame men's basketball team about the seasons that came before it, and you'd likely get a different answer than you were expecting.

MEN'S BASKETBALL

There was little acknowledgment of what went wrong in the previous two years under head coach Micah Shrewsberry, only optimism about what could lie ahead. Markus Burton told *Blue & Gold Illustrated* that the Irish had everything they needed. Players touted a winning culture, despite little winning having come of it. The piece of evidence they often pointed to — the number of players who stayed — no longer applies after six left via the transfer portal.

Optimism, in and of itself, is fine. Everyone believes they're a tournament team in July. But in hindsight, the "trust us, we got this" approach looks misguided. The Irish had their worst year of Shrewsberry's tenure, finishing 4-14 in ACC play and failing to qualify for the conference tournament. In the ensuing weeks, their three biggest building blocks in the backcourt — including Burton, a native of nearby Mishawaka — walked out the door.

This time around, returners like senior guards Braeden Shrewsberry and Logan Imes aren't hiding from Notre Dame's past.

"I've been here for three years, and we haven't won s---," Shrewsberry said.

"We've underperformed the last three years," Imes said. "Everyone knows that. It's not a secret."

It's a stark change, and one that starts at the very top. Micah Shrewsberry spent one of Notre Dame's first team meetings with its roster, which includes 10 new players, spelling that out.

"The last three years haven't gone like we've wanted them to go," Shrewsberry said. "Some of them have experienced it and some of them haven't, but we all bear responsibility now."

Ironically enough, some of those bearing the most responsibility are the ones who had significantly more success last season and beyond: Notre Dame's three key transfer additions. Center Logan Duncomb, point guard Braeden Smith and wing Ethan Roberts have taken on leadership roles this year, due to their age and experience but also because of their history of winning basketball.

Transfer point guard Braeden Smith, who has made the NCAA Tournament every year he's played in college, is among a trio of newcomers that have assumed a leadership role to help the Irish attempt to revamp their culture.

PHOTO COURTESY NOTRE DAME ATHLETICS

Smith has made the NCAA Tournament every year he's played in college, twice with Colgate and twice with Gonzaga. Roberts helped lead Penn to its first tournament appearance since 2018. Duncomb's Winthrop team fell one game short of March Madness, but he played the Big South Tournament on a broken foot and lost only to High Point, which advanced to the round of 32.

The three of them have found a team that needs not just experience, but winning experience, and they're happy to be the ones filling that void.

"I want to reiterate how open they've been to us finding leadership roles, vocal roles as guys who have won and been to the tournament, have that experience. That says so much about them," Roberts said. "Allowing people to come in and be themselves too, and not be so, 'It's my way or the highway,' it's been amazing."

NEW CULTURE AT NOTRE DAME?

The tone out of Rolfs Athletics Hall this summer is less "trust the process" and more "the process didn't work; we need a new process."

That's something the newcomers, such as Duncomb, sensed right away. Instead of lauding the culture that existed, he recognized his returning teammates' efforts to build a new one.

"I think the older guys know how frustrating losing is," Duncomb said. "They're not dumb. The older guys know what problems they had the years before. I feel like the culture they're trying to build here is a positive one, where winning can happen."

Duncomb didn't see the previous three years of Notre Dame men's basketball for himself, but he can tell something is different about the current group. So can Roberts, who didn't play in the tournament last season due to a concussion but contributed heavily to Penn's run.

"All the guys on the team, basketball is their No. 1 priority," Duncomb said. "That's something that I'm not sure was the case last year. I know that this year, all the guys on the team are about the right stuff. I see Braeden and all the older guys in the gym every day. They don't want to lose again."

"That's where I've seen it," Roberts said. "Their true passion and spark are still there. I didn't see the years before, but it's more than enough. I think that's all that matters."

Each major transfer addition, in addition to their age and experience, brings something Notre Dame lacked in the past. For Duncomb, it's consistent post scoring. For Smith, it's an elite assist-to-turnover ratio and calm leadership that can help the Irish when things go awry.

"One of our standards is being disciplined in chaos, and I thought we've struggled there in the last few years," Micah Shrewsberry said. "His voice rings louder than others during those moments. Like, 'Hey, we're fine.' He is the calming voice that gets everybody back on track."

Roberts is a scorer on the court — how well his game translates to the high-major level is one of the biggest swing factors for the Irish. His most important trait might be that he grew up a die-hard Notre Dame fan. His care factor is extremely high. To succeed this season would mean, for the rest of his life, looking back and saying, "I'm part of the group that turned this thing around."

"I'll get chills," Roberts said. "I would get a clover tattoo, and I don't even have a tattoo. That's how much it means to me." ✦

Notre Dame Isn't Playing The Long Game With Freshman Guard Jacy Abii

BY TYLER HORKA

Niele Ivey already has a comp for Jacy Abii. It's one that'll leave the Notre Dame freshman guard with a whole lot to live up to.

How about two consecutive Notre Dame seasons of 14.5-plus points, 6.5-plus rebounds and 3.5-plus assists, hitting the 7-plus and 5-plus marks, respectively, in those latter two categories in the second of those seasons? How about a national championship coming with the first of those two seasons?

How about a No. 1 overall pick in the WNBA Draft and eight stellar seasons that have followed? This player is a five-time WNBA All-Star, a three-time WNBA champion. This player was on the WNBA All-Rookie Team and was the WNBA's Most Improved Player in 2022.

This player is Jackie Young.

If Abii is anything close to as good as she is, Ivey and the Irish sure do have something special on their hands.

"On my visits and during the recruiting process, she mentioned that comparison," Abii said. "I definitely have been watching her for quite some time even aside from the Notre Dame legacy. Especially coming here, I am really aware of her game. Studying her game, trying to develop those aspects in all the ways I can. I have a lot of potential, and Coach Ivey wants me to play as much to that level as I possibly can, especially coming in as a freshman."

At 6-foot-2 and with an impressively built frame, one that looks like a guard in a forward's body and one that seems ready to withstand the rigors of an ACC women's basketball schedule, Abii doesn't come across as a freshman, physically. The hope is that she doesn't play like one either.

Even Young eased into the college game a bit. Before doing enough to become the WNBA's No. 1 overall pick after playing just three seasons at Notre Dame, she did not start a single time as a freshman. She averaged 7.3 points, 4.6 rebounds and 1.4 assists in 21.4 minutes per game.

Freshman Jacy Abii could follow in the footsteps of some greats who have come before her and be a Irish major contributor from the start.
PHOTO COURTESY NOTRE DAME ATHLETICS

There will be a lot more on Abii's plate from the start, and, for her sake, hopefully a lot more of the pie to bite from. It's sitting directly in front of her, staring her in the face, and the only one stopping her from taking out a sizable slice is herself.

As it stands, Abii will start for Notre Dame from the very beginning. The Irish only have 10 players on the roster. Five of them, including Abii, are true freshmen. One of those first-year players, Bella Ragone, is still rehabbing a high school knee injury. Two of them, Amari Byles and Isabella Sangha, are working as post players this offseason. The final freshman not named Abii is a completely different style of player; Jenica Lewis is 5-foot-10 and more of a perimeter shooter and paint slasher. She's not the imposing force Abii is by any stretch.

Abii is one-of-one as far as this Notre Dame freshman class goes and one-of-one on this entire Fighting Irish roster. Her time is right away, from the moment the ball tips off against Villanova in Rome Nov. 1.

"I've had to take a step back and realize how blessed I am," Abii said, "especially coming off the injury two years ago. Being able to handle so much is just a blessing. God put me in this position for a reason. Even with everything they're throwing at me, I'm excited, it's a lot of fun. During workouts, I'll be struggling, dead tired, and then afterwards a smile is on my face because I'm enjoying the process. I enjoy being challenged and knowing I'm developed in certain ways."

Ivey and the most veteran of Notre Dame's players, Princeton transfer Madison St. Rose, enjoy watching Abii push herself and come into her own so early in her college experience.

"The versatility that she has, I think that's one of her superpowers," Ivey said. "She can play multiple positions. She's very comfortable on the perimeter, but she also has great size and can go inside. I'm going to mix it up for her, but this summer I've really worked on her perimeter game. I've really worked on her initiating the offense, being comfortable on the wings, being comfortable coming off ball screens.

"She's so gifted in so many different areas. She's a great passer. She's really smart. ... I don't want to throw too much at her, but she can do so many things well. I'm trying to narrow the things that I'm teaching her, but she's going to be special."

St. Rose echoed Ivey on the subject of Abii's versatility. She said she could see Abii's confidence grow in real time with each summer practice. There are so many first-year players who'd love to be as advanced as Abii at this stage in the game.

Abii just so happens to be setting the standard.

"She doesn't look like a freshman on the court," St. Rose said. "I really do see a lot of potential in her. I see a lot of growth coming ahead for her. And I'm excited to keep continuing to play with her." ✦

The Irish men's (above) and women's fencing squads captured national championships for Notre Dame this past year.

PHOTO COURTESY NOTRE DAME ATHLETICS

2025-26 DIRECTORS' CUP FINAL STANDINGS

Rk.	School	Points
1.	Texas	1,322.00
2.	Stanford*	1,263.50
3.	UCLA	1,199.25
4.	North Carolina*	1,166.75
5.	Virginia*	1,148.75
6.	Florida	1,104.50
7.	Southern Cal	1,095.50
8.	Georgia	1,081.25
9.	Michigan	1,076.75
10.	Ohio State	1,071.25
11.	Duke*	1,039.25
19.	**Notre Dame***	**898.50**
22.	NC State*	860.00
29.	Louisville*	711.50
39.	California*	653.75
41.	Florida State*	604.00
42.	Clemson*	601.50
54.	Wake Forest*	505.75
55.	Virginia Tech*	470.50
57.	Miami (Fla.)*	452.00
59.	Syracuse*	447.00
64.	SMU*	406.50
83.	Boston College*	276.00
84.	Pittsburgh*	267.75
90.	Georgia Tech*	233.00

** ACC schools*

MOVIN' ON UP

The 2025-26 Irish athletics year marked an uptick in performance for Notre Dame

BY TODD D. BURLAGE

On the strength of two fencing national championships, one for the Irish men and one for the Irish women, a national runner-up finish for men's lacrosse and some solid work from other Irish sports programs, Notre Dame showed some marked improvement in 2025-26 from its overall athletic performance in 2024-25.

Notre Dame finished 19th in the Directors' Cup standings in 2025-26, a 16-place jump from 2024-25 when it muddled through a 35th-place finish in the annual competition, its worst ranking in at least 30 years.

The Directors' Cup compiles results from all varsity sports, attaches a score to each of those based mainly on postseason results and combines the scores to rank overall athletic achievement for every school in the country.

With the overall Irish athletics performance as a backdrop, let's revisit the top five storylines from the 2025-26 athletic and scholastic year.

FOOTBALL PLAYOFF SNUB

Given the difficult circumstances surrounding Notre Dame football last year, the 2025 season might be remembered as the one that was taken away, rather than the one that slipped away.

The Irish started the 2025 season 0-2

2025-26 Female Athletes of the Year

1. Hannah Hidalgo (basketball) — Collecting more hardware for her already packed trophy case, the Merchantville, N.J., native won both ACC Player of the Year and ACC Defensive Player of the Year honors, and also earned the National Defensive Player of the Year award, All-America recognition and the 2026 Nancy Lieberman Award as the nation's best point guard during her historic junior season.

The greatest defensive player in Fighting Irish history, Hidalgo averaged 5.6 steals per game on her way to an NCAA single-season record 202 takeaways. Also Notre Dame's leading scorer, Hidalgo averaged 25.3 points per game and set a single-season team record with 909 total points.

2. Izzy Engle (soccer) — On pace to set every scoring record in Notre Dame women's soccer history, the Edina, Minn., native earned countless individual honors after her stellar sophomore season in 2025, including ACC Offensive Player of the Year and first-team All-America recognition, along with a MAC Hermann Trophy finalist nomination as the best player in the country.

Also a CSC Academic All-American, the star Irish midfielder finished the 2025 season with 19 goals, 6 assists and 44 points to lead the ACC, finished second in the nation with 1.00 goal per game, and also led the league and finished third in the country with 2.32 points per game.

3. Eszter Muhari (fencing) — The Budapest, Hungary, native capped off her historic career by winning the NCAA individual épée national championship last March in leading her Irish team to the 2025-26 NCAA women's fencing team title. The Irish senior cruised to a 13-1 victory in the title match over Princeton's Hadley Husisian, marking Muhari's third career individual NCAA épée title (2023, 2025, 2026).

Along the way last season, the ACC Co-Scholar Athlete of the Year also collected first-team All-America honors for the third time and earned 2026 USFCA Women's Épée Collegiate Athlete of the Year and ACC Women's Épée Fencer of the Year recognition.

4. Sophie Novak (track and field) — Wrapping up a stellar track career that included three All-America selections, three ACC individual championships and four All-ACC academic honors, the grad student from Lake Orion, Mich., finished national runner-up in the 3,000-meter steeplechase at the 2026 NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships June 13 in Eugene, Ore.

Novak also claimed her second straight individual ACC title in the event last May and was named the Great Lakes Region Outdoor Women's Track Athlete of the Year in June. A 2024 U.S. Olympic Trials steeplechase qualifier, Novak holds the Irish program record in the event with a 9:24.95.

5. Kate Timarky (lacrosse) — After finishing second in the ACC and 26th nationally with 54 goals during the 2026 season, the Centereach, N.Y., native earned All-ACC and second-team All-America honors from USA Lacrosse after leading the Irish with 70 points.

The junior attacker also earned third-team All-America honors from the Women's Lacrosse Coaches Association during a season where she surpassed the 100 career-point milestone. Timarky finished second in the ACC and 11th nationally with 3.60 goals per game, and she scored 5 or more goals in five games to finish third in the league with 4.67 points per game.

— Todd D. Burlage

Hannah Hidalgo won both ACC Player of the Year and ACC Defensive Player of the Year honors and also earned the National Defensive Player of the Year award.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

after losses in their first two games, and their two most difficult games, against Miami (Fla.) and Texas A&M.

Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman rallied the troops and won the final 10 regular-season games to finish 10-2, seemingly in great shape for a second straight College Football Playoff appearance.

The Irish were ranked No. 10 in the second-to-last playoff rankings, apparently in the field as the final at-large team after rolling through a perfect 5-0 November.

Instead, the CFP selection committee pulled an unexpected last-ballot flip-flop and moved Miami from No. 12 to No. 10, and dropped Notre Dame from No. 10 to No. 11, putting the Hurricanes into the field, while leaving the Irish out.

"Why put these young student-athletes through these false emotions just to pull the rug out from underneath them?" Notre Dame athletic director Pete Bevacqua lamented afterward. "We feel like the playoff was stolen from our student-athletes."

SURGING FOOTBALL RECRUITING

So while the 2025 Notre Dame football team dealt with the deepest of disappointments, the future of the Fighting Irish football program continued to show great momentum and promise.

In what was rated as the best recruit-

ing class signed by Notre Dame since the internet ratings era launched more than 20 years ago, the 30-man 2026 recruiting class was rated No. 2 in the country, only behind Southern Cal.

According to the Rivals Industry Team Ranking, it marked only the fifth top-five recruiting class Notre Dame has ever signed, and the first since 2013.

The 2026 class included five five-star recruits, another single-class record during the internet era. Before this year, Notre Dame had never signed more than three five-star players in a class.

Additionally, according to the Rivals rankings, Notre Dame's 2026 recruiting class tied for first nationally with a 70 percent Blue Chip Ratio, a percentage measuring how many four- and five-star recruits make up an entire recruiting class.

"We were on the right guys, nobody decommitted," Freeman said upon signing his historic class. "They bought into what this place has to offer, and I'm excited for what their future holds."

DOUBLE THE FUN

Competing for the first time under a new format of separate men's and women's competitions for national championships — instead of the traditional one combined co-ed event — Notre Dame again flexed its collective fencing muscle on its home turf and won both national titles at the NCAA Championships March 19-22 in South Bend.

As the host school competing inside the Joyce Center on campus, the Irish fencers claimed their 15th and 16th overall national championships — including their second straight — and their seventh and eighth under head coach Gia Kvaratskhelia.

"Defending a title is always harder than winning the title because the expectations are so high," Kvaratskhelia said. "And secondly, they were competing at home and that puts more stress and pressure on the athletes. You don't want the trophy to be taken away from your compound."

In all, six Irish women earned All-America honors, including senior Eszter Muhari, who claimed her third overall individual championship and her second straight national title in epee.

Meanwhile, the Irish men earned five All-America honors, including one from sophomore Ahmed Hesham, who claimed his first individual national title in sabre.

SHINING THE LYGHT

The Notre Dame men's lacrosse team fell one game short of winning a third national title in the last four seasons, but still enjoyed a terrific season and

2025-26 Male Athletes of the Year

1. Jeremiyah Love (football) — Arguably the most electrifying player in college football last season, the St. Louis native was the most decorated tailback in the country, becoming a 2025 Heisman finalist, the Doak Walker Award winner and a unanimous All-American.

The Irish junior broke the single-season Notre Dame record with 21 total touchdowns and tied the school record with 18 rushing scores. Love also set a single-game record at Notre Dame Stadium last October, with 228 rushing yards in a 34-24 win over Southern Cal. For the season, Love — who was the No. 3 overall pick of the Arizona Cardinals in the 2026 NFL Draft — rushed for 1,372 yards on 6.9 yards per carry, and added 280 receiving yards.

2. Shawn Lyght (lacrosse) — The Scotch Plains, N.J., native became the first defenseman in NCAA history to win the Tewaaraton Award as the best men's college lacrosse player in the country. The Irish junior led Notre Dame to the NCAA championship game and to an ACC regular-season title after anchoring a defense that allowed only 8.94 goals per game.

Jeremiyah Love — a 2025 Heisman finalist, the Doak Walker Award winner, and a unanimous All-American — broke the single-season Notre Dame record with 21 total touchdowns.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

Lyght — who also earned the Schmeisser National Defensive Player of the Year award from USA Lacrosse and ACC Co-Defensive Player of the Year honors last season — became the second winner for Notre Dame of the Tewaaraton Award in the last three years after attacker Pat Kavanagh earned the honor in 2024.

3. Leonard Moore (football) — The Freshman Defensive Player of the Year in 2024, this talented cornerback avoided the sophomore slump in 2025 and brought home unanimous All-America honors.

In only 10 games, the Round Rock, Texas, native still posted 5 interceptions — the third-best mark in the country — including a 46-yard pick six. Moore also ranked eighth nationally with 1.2 passes defended per game and added 31 tackles, 7 passes broken ups and 1 forced fumble. Pro Football Focus ranked Moore first among all starting Power Four cornerbacks in coverage grade (92.6) and first in overall defensive grade (92.0).

4. Jack Radel (baseball) — The Sioux Falls, S.D., native earned third-team All-America honors from D1Baseball.com after a stellar junior season in which he ranked among the nation's best in several key categories. The 6-foot-5, 250-pound right-hander — who also earned first-team All-ACC honors and twice won ACC Pitcher of the Week recognition — ranked 19th nationally with 116 strikeouts and 48th with 8 victories on his 15 starts with an Irish team that finished 32-22.

The 28th overall selection by the Houston Astros in the June MLB Draft, Radel became the highest pick for an Irish player since 2013 and the highest for a Notre Dame pitcher since 2001.

5. Sebastian Dominko (tennis) — The Maribor, Slovenia, native made program history and collected more postseason hardware after a terrific senior season as both a singles and a doubles player. Dominko earned first-team All-ACC honors as a singles player and teamed with Perry Gregg to take home third-team all-conference recognition in doubles.

It was the fourth time Dominko was named to the All-ACC singles team, three straight on the first team, and also the fourth time he earned all-league honors in doubles.

During the 2025 fall season, the future pro went 23-7 overall and earned a fourth consecutive trip to the NCAA Singles Championships.

— Todd D. Burlage

finished runner-up in the country following a 16-9 loss to No. 1 Princeton May 25 in Charlottesville, Va.

The Irish won the ACC regular-season title and earned the No. 1 seed in the conference tournament after finishing 3-1 in league play and 13-3 overall.

As the No. 2 overall seed in the NCAA Championships, the Irish reached the final match after beating Jacksonville, Johns Hopkins and Syracuse, before falling to Princeton.

"I think there's a lot to be proud of this season, made it to the national championship, and that was the goal from the fall," Irish graduate attacker Josh Yago said after the game. "We fell short, which is unfortunate. But I know the guys in the locker room are gonna use that as fuel for next year."

Following the season, Irish junior Shawn Lyght became the first defenseman in NCAA history to win the Tewaaraton Award as the best men's lacrosse player in the country. Lyght also garnered Schmeisser National Defensive Player of the Year honors for the second straight season.

A RIGHT ENGLE

Despite a loss in the championship game of the ACC Tournament and a second-round defeat in the NCAA Championship, the Irish women's soccer team enjoyed one of the best seasons during its eight years under head coach Nate Norman.

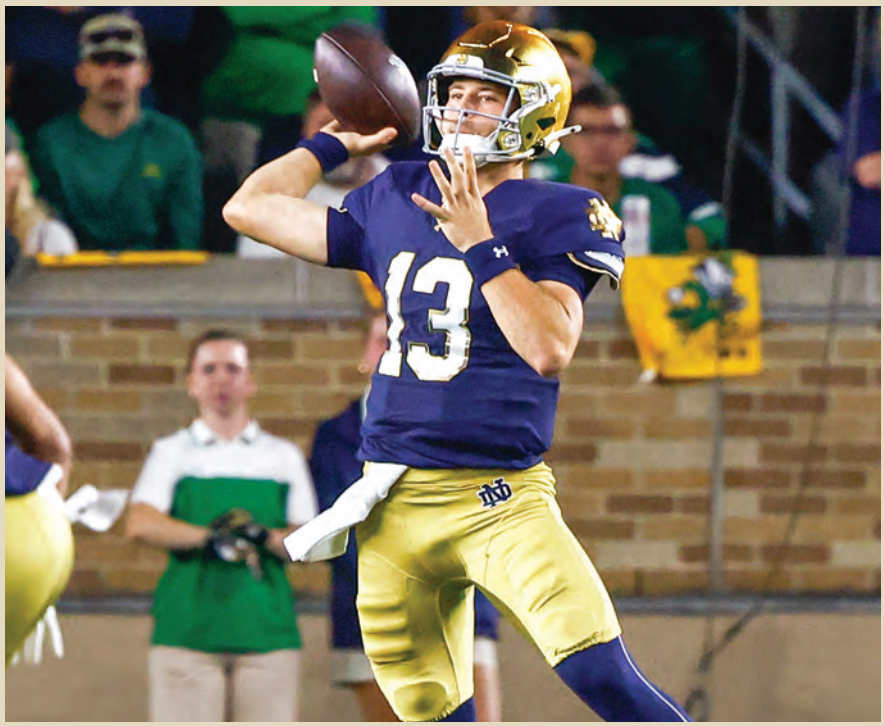
Notre Dame finished 15-2-3 overall and 8-1-1 in conference play.

After starting the season 13-0-1 — a stretch that included a 12-game winning streak — the Irish rose to No. 1 in the country and became the favorite to win a fourth national title in program history, and their first since 2010.

Notre Dame earned the No. 1 seed in its NCAA Tournament bracket and beat Illinois-Chicago in the first round before falling 1-0 to Ohio State in a heartbreaking double-overtime loss in the second round.

"We have had lots of adversity, and they kept overcoming it. I'm so proud of them," Norman said. "... I feel like I'm in a little bit of a bad dream right now."

The Irish were led by sophomore midfielder Izzy Engle, who scored 19 goals and totaled 44 points to earn ACC Offensive Player of the Year honors and first-team All-America recognition. ✦



CJ Carr threw for 2,741 yards and 24 touchdowns and completed 66.7 percent of his passes.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

2025-26 Top Rookies of the Year

1. CJ Carr (football) — The Saline, Mich., native won the full-time starting quarterback job for Notre Dame in 2025 and ended up becoming one of the best first-year signal-callers in Fighting Irish history.

Carr threw for 2,741 yards and 24 touchdowns and completed 66.7 percent of his passes. He tossed at least one touchdown pass in all 12 Notre Dame games and he had multiple touchdown passes in nine games. One of the 2026 preseason favorites to win the Heisman Trophy, Carr won Manning Award Quarterback of the Week and Shaun Alexander Freshman of the Week honors last October after he threw for a season-high 354 yards with 4 touchdowns in a 56-13 win over Arkansas.

2. Jalen Haralson (men's basketball) — This former five-star high school recruit lived up to the hype during his freshman season when the 6-foot-7 guard averaged 16.2 points per game, the fourth-most for an Irish rookie in program history. Haralson, who earned honorable mention All-ACC honors, was especially dominant down the stretch last season when he recorded five 20-point games over the last eight outings of the campaign.

The Anderson, Ind., native averaged 17.4 points in ACC games, which ranked ninth overall and fifth among conference rookies. Following his tremendous rookie season, Haralson announced he was transferring to Tennessee for his sophomore year.

3. Brauntae Johnson (football) — A 2026 preseason All-American, this talented safety earned Freshman All-America honors last season when he finished fourth on the team with 48 tackles and second on the Irish with 4 interceptions. In 10 games with eight starts, the Fort Wayne, Ind., native recorded 2 interceptions on Nov. 1 against Boston College and added a 49-yard interception return for a touchdown against Pitt Nov. 15.

Johnson also tallied 5 tackles and 0.5 tackles for loss in the Pitt game to earn Shaun Alexander Player of the Week honors and the Walter Camp National FBS Defensive Player of the Week award.

4. Ava Zachary (softball) — The star freshman infielder appeared in all 51 games, started 43 times for the Irish, and led the team in hitting with a .406 batting average. The Mishawaka, Ind., native also led Notre Dame in doubles (13) and RBI (31), and was second on the Irish in home runs (5), hits (56) and runs (34).

Zachary had 17 multi-hit games during her freshman campaign to secure second-team All-ACC and Freshman All-ACC honors. Following her terrific rookie season, Zachary announced she was transferring to Arkansas for her sophomore year.

5. Maya Baker (volleyball) — The Irish setter from San Jose, Calif., played in all 28 matches last season, made 12 starts and led Notre Dame with 549 assists.

Baker, also an All-ACC Academic Team honoree, made her first career start and cemented her place in the starting lineup Aug. 29, when she recorded 21 assists, 9 digs and a career-high 3 service aces. She notched a double-double with 21 assists and 13 digs against Villanova on Aug. 31, and posted a career-high 31 assists (10.3 assists per set) and 2 kills in a win over Duke Oct. 26.

— Todd D. Burlage

NOTRE DAME
SPORTS

Irish Fall Sports Teams Reaching For Even More

Senior midfielder Nolan Spicer tied for the team lead last season with 11 points on 2 goals and 7 assists.

PHOTO COURTESY NOTRE DAME ATHLETICS

BY TODD D. BURLAGE

With NCAA Tournament appearances by the men's and women's soccer squads, two top-15 national finishes from the Irish cross country teams and notable improvement from Notre Dame volleyball, the five fall Irish Olympic sports programs enjoyed solid seasons in 2025.

With plenty of talented athletes and promising newcomers back for 2026, the five Irish coaches that lead these programs can't wait to get started to at least match, and maybe even surpass, the successes of last season.

MEN'S CROSS COUNTRY

Season Opener: Winrow-Valparaiso Open Sept. 4 at Valparaiso, Ind.

ACC Predicted Finish: Top three in a wide-open field.

NCAA Best-Case Scenario: Finish in the top 10.

Coach's Expectations: With five of his top seven runners back from a team that finished fourth in the ACC and 13th nationally last season, Notre Dame director of men's and women's cross country Matt Sparks can't help but talk about big goals this season. The ACC is wide open, with Wake Forest as a slight favorite to win the conference title. But don't rule out Notre Dame to claim the title and earn its first ACC championship since 2021. And as far as the national meet, Sparks said a top-10 finish is definitely attainable.

"The talent is there, the collegiate accolades are there, and now they just have to put it all together at the same time," Sparks explained. "But the talent is definitely in place to have a great season."

If this season and Sparks' projections are going to hold together, veteran runners CJ Singleton and Daelen Ackley will have to set a leadership tone both on the course and during practice.

Top Runner: Graduate student Ethan Coleman grabbed All-ACC accolades for the third time with a seventh-place finish in the conference meet and earned All-America honors with a 28th-place finish at the NCAA Championship last season.

Athlete To Watch: Immediate impact is expected from incoming freshman Noah Bontrager. The Westview (Ind.) High School distance star is the first Indiana high school runner to ever break a four-minute mile, and as a senior last season, he ran the second-fastest two-mile time in the country by a high schooler.

Don't Miss: With no clear favorites in the league this season, the ACC Championship race Oct. 30 in Blacksburg, Va., will be as entertaining as any conference meet in recent memory.

WOMEN'S CROSS COUNTRY

Season Opener: Winrow-Valparaiso Open Sept. 4 at Valparaiso, Ind.

ACC Predicted Finish: Top three with defending national champ NC State back and loaded again.

NCAA Best-Case Scenario: Finish in the top five.

Coach's Expectations: With a runner-up finish at the ACC Championship and a seventh-place showing at the NCAA Championship in 2025, Notre Dame maximized its postseason efforts last season.

And with his "power duo" back in juniors Mary Bonner Dalton and Amaya Aramini, Notre Dame director of men's and women's cross country Matt Sparks sees no reason why his team can't take another step in 2026.

"There is a confidence and a swagger about this group," said Sparks, who returns five of his top seven runners from last season. "Competing for a program that perpetually ranks top 10 in the country allows them to walk into any season knowing that they can do great things."

Beyond the two junior team leaders, look for senior Gretchen Farley to again improve after finishing 30th in the ACC Championship and 135th nationally last season.

Top Runner: As a sophomore in 2025, Mary Bonner Dalton paced the Irish with a second-place individual finish in the ACC Championship and earned All-America honors with a 10th-place finish at the NCAA Championship.

Athlete To Watch: An NCAA Championship qualifier in the 10K during the 2026 outdoor track and field season, rising junior Amaya Aramini returns after earning All-America cross country honors last season with a 25th-place finish in the NCAA Championship. Aramini also finished 16th in the 2025 ACC Championship.

Don't Miss: Dethroning defending NCAA champion NC State remains a long shot. But chasing down a top-five finish in the NCAA Championship Nov. 21 is a mission worth watching.

Rising junior midfielder Izzy Engle, the 2025 ACC Offensive Player of the Year and a first-team All-American, led Notre Dame with 19 goals and 44 points last season.

PHOTO COURTESY NOTRE DAME ATHLETICS

MEN'S SOCCER

Season Opener: at Indiana Aug. 20 in Bloomington, Ind.

ACC Predicted Finish: A top-three contender in the nation's toughest league.

NCAA Best-Case Scenario: Qualify for a spot in the College Cup Final Four.

Coach's Expectations: Playing in the nation's best conference every year makes nonconference scheduling an interesting endeavor for head coach Chad Riley. So what did the ninth-year Irish skipper do? He added standout programs Harvard and Northwestern to his already rigorous regular-season slate.

Riley's Irish made the NCAA Tournament as an at-large team last season. They beat Michigan in Round 1, and then lost to Akron 1-0 in the second round to cap a solid but not spectacular 9-7-4 season. The preseason No. 9 Irish lost some firepower from last year's team. But there is plenty of returning talent to survive in a conference that has five teams ranked in the preseason top 10.

"You will see a much more battle-hardened mature team that has sort of seen it all," Riley said of his scheduling philosophy, "which should help us."

Top Player: Senior midfielder Nolan Spicer was named one of three 2026 team captains for his leadership skills and after tying for the team lead last season with 11 points on 2 goals and 7 assists.

Athlete To Watch: Junior goalkeeper Blake Kelly is back after finishing third in the ACC last season with 3.55 saves per game. Riley has called Kelly one of the best netminders in the nation.

Don't Miss: An annual in-state rivalry game between preseason No. 9 Notre Dame and No. 15 Indiana to open the regular season Aug. 20 in Bloomington will be a must-see match between two of the best teams in the country.

WOMEN'S SOCCER

Season Opener: vs. Samford Aug. 12 in South Bend.

ACC Predicted Finish: Top two in a loaded league, that includes national title contenders Florida State, North Carolina and Duke.

NCAA Best-Case Scenario: Win a national title.

Coach's Expectations: To think that rising to No. 1 in the country, winning 12 consecutive games and earning the No. 3 overall seed in the NCAA Championship would be a "disappointing" season profile doesn't seem to fit. But that's how Irish head coach Nate Norman and his returning cast of terrific players feel heading into the 2026 season.

Notre Dame brings back its top-four point scorers from a team that finished 15-2-3 overall last season, and was considered one of the favorites to claim the national title before getting knocked out in a heartbreaking 1-0, double-overtime loss to Ohio State in a second-round game.

"We got upset in an early NCAA Tournament game that we wish we had back, but we're still here," Norman said. "... This is a second chance."

Top Player: The 2025 ACC Offensive Player of the Year and a first-team All-American, rising junior midfielder Izzy Engle returns as one of the best players in the country after leading Notre Dame with 19 goals and 44 points last season.

Athlete To Watch: A perfect offensive complement to Engle, junior forward Annabelle Chukwu returns after finishing second on Notre Dame last season with 12 goals and 27 points to earn first-team All-ACC honors.

Don't Miss: A matchup between No. 13 Notre Dame and top-ranked Florida State is scheduled Oct. 24. It's a game that could decide the ACC regular-season title.

VOLLEYBALL

Season Opener: vs. Ball State Aug. 28 in South Bend.

ACC Predicted Finish: Somewhere in the sixth through 10th range of this talented 18-team league.

NCAA Best-Case Scenario: Just making the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2020 would provide a needed momentum boost for the program.

Coach's Expectations: In no way trying to diminish the efforts of the first four teams led by Irish head coach Salima Rockwell from 2022-25, but Rockwell believes there is something different and more special within this 2026 group. Rockwell's Irish improved to 9-11 in ACC play last season after finishing only 5-15 in 2024, with some opportunities left behind.

The Irish lost five five-set matches in 2025, one of those coming against ACC champion and NCAA Final Four participant Pitt. So, finding a way to better close out winnable matches in the toughest volleyball conference in the country is priority No. 1 heading into Rockwell's fifth season.

"When you taste it, like we did at times last year, it just makes you more hungry. And they are excited to get back after it," Rockwell said. "We've been on a mission to grow this program, and we felt like we were turning a corner last year."

Top Player: Senior outside hitter Sydney Helmers returns as the team's vocal and statistical leader after recording 229 kills, 157 digs, 36 blocks and 25 service aces last season.

Athlete To Watch: Reliable junior middle blocker Anna Bjork is back after pacing the Irish with 125 blocks last season to go along with 106 kills.

Don't Miss: Notre Dame plays a home-and-home series with perennial national power Louisville Sept. 30 and Oct. 3, a quick two-match test for the Irish. ✦

Senior outside hitter Sydney Helmers returns as the team's leader after recording 229 kills, 157 digs, 36 blocks and 25 service aces last season.

PHOTO COURTESY NOTRE DAME ATHLETICS

PGA Player Davis Chatfield Making His Professional Mark

BY TODD D. BURLAGE

If a young PGA upstart golfer was ever looking for a confidence boost, one former Notre Dame star recently got his in spades.

IRISH IN THE PROS

Fifth-year PGA pro Davis Chatfield came within only a few strokes of winning his first PGA Tour event when he finished tied for fifth with a 14-under par at the ISCO Championship July 9-12 in Louisville, Ky.

The 2021 Notre Dame graduate posted rounds of 68, 64, 66 and 68 on the par-70 Hurstbourne Country Club course to earn $148,000 and secure 60 FedEx Playoff points in the best finish of his PGA career.

"This gives me confidence to know that I can win and be in contention any week," Chatfield told reporters after the tournament. "I feel like I've been really close the last few months. And to see it come to fruition this week is really special."

Chatfield made only two bogies during the entire 72-hole tournament and finished just two shots behind ISCO winner Steven Fisk. Afterward, the 27-year-old Chatfield explained how a change in approach and mindset helped fuel his terrific finish, and also helped him make the weekend cut in three straight PGA events.

Chatfield finished in a three-way tie for fifth place with a 14-under-par 266 at the ISCO Championship July 9-12 in Louisville, Ky.

PHOTO COURTESY PGA TOUR

"What it boils down to, I was playing golf *swing*. I wasn't playing golf," the Attleboro, Mass., native explained. "I was thinking way too much of mechanics and things that I shouldn't be. I kind of let go of that, and it's showing on the score card."

Without minimizing the best weekend of Chatfield's pro career, the PGA's top stars were overseas that weekend playing in the Scottish Open to prepare for the British Open the following week.

But solid PGA players such as Max Homa, Tom Hoge and Camilo Villegas were part of the 144-player ISCO Championship field. In fact, former U.S. Open champion Lucas Glover joined Chatfield as part of the three-way tie for fifth place.

After his terrific finish, Chatfield also recognized Irish head golf coach John Handrigan for some continued advice and support.

"I still keep in touch with him quite a bit," Chatfield shared of the relationship with his former college coach. "He's always told me that my game is good enough to compete out here. ... I don't hit it that far. I just try to hit a bunch of fairways and greens, and he's always just told me to stay with it, and I have." ✦

FIGHTING IRISH HEADLINERS

Marina Mabrey (2015-19), SG, Toronto Tempo, WNBA

A well-traveled seven-year WNBA veteran, the first-year Tempo player ranked fourth in scoring in the league as of July 22, with 21.0 points per game. During a recent scoring surge, the 29-year-old Mabrey tallied a career-high 53 points in a 125-97 win over her former team, the Los Angeles Sparks, June 25.

Remarkably, Mabrey was averaging her 21.0 points per game in just 29.4 minutes per outing. The 2019 second-round draft pick of Los Angeles is also averaging 3.4 rebounds and 3.6 assists per game.

Cormac Ryan, (2020-23), SG, Milwaukee Bucks, NBA

After cracking the Milwaukee Bucks' active roster late in the 2025-26 regular season, the New York City native competed during the Bucks' summer season in Las Vegas this July in an effort to secure that spot.

Ryan, 27, played in two of Milwaukee's five summer league games and averaged 11.0 points, 6.5 rebounds, 2.0 steals and 1.5 assists in 25.3 minutes per outing. Ryan could assume the role of former Irish shooting guard Pat Connaughton, who played seven seasons as a valuable backup with the Bucks before being traded to Charlotte prior to last season.

Jessica Shepard (2017-19), F, Dallas Wings, WNBA

Playing her first season in Dallas after seven seasons with the Minnesota Lynx, the Fremont, Neb., native is feeling right at home with her new team.

Through 27 games as of July 22, the 29-year-old Shepard was second on the Wings in scoring at 14.9 points per game and led the league with 12.0 rebounds per game. A triple threat player, Shepard was also second on her team with 5.4 assists per game.

Notre Dame's All-Time Wisconsin Team

Notre Dame's visit to Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis., on Sept. 6 will be the first Fighting Irish game in the Badger State in 62 years. It was on Sept. 26, 1964 — the first game of the Ara Parseghian era — that the Irish downed Wisconsin, 31-7, before 64,398 fans at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison.

Throughout the decades, the state of Wisconsin has provided Notre Dame with plenty of talent. Here's a look at what we consider to be the "all-time" Notre Dame team from Wisconsin.

QUARTERBACK

Charles "Gus" Dorais, Chippewa Falls, 1910-13

The diminutive (5-7, 145) signal-caller held the reigns for all four seasons, in which Notre Dame went 24-1-3 and gained national attention for beating Army. He captained the 1912 Irish and teamed with Knute Rockne in 1913 to revolutionize the use of the forward pass.

Backup: Chuck Jaskwhich, Kenosha, 1930-32. Served as backup to All-American Fran Carideo for the 1930 national champs. Also led the '32 Irish with 23 punt returns for 254 yards.

HALFBACK

Jim Crowley, Green Bay, 1922-24

The fleet, versatile Crowley gained starter status in his sophomore year of 1922 and went on to earn All-America honors as one of The Four Horsemen backfield for the 1924 national champs. He led the '24 team with 74 points, and finished second in rushing, passing and receiving yards.

Backups: Tom "Red" Hearden, Green Bay, 1924-26. A ferocious blocking back, he captained the 9-1 1926 Irish; Rocky Bleier, Appleton, 1965-67. Totaled 784 rushing and 422 receiving yards, with 14 touchdowns in his career.

HALFBACK

Terry Brennan, Milwaukee, 1945-48

Brennan, out of Marquette University High, rushed for 1,269 yards in his four seasons at Notre Dame while adding 477 receiving yards. He twice led the team in receptions and yardage. The Irish were unbeaten in his final three seasons, going 26-0-2 and winning national titles in '46 and '47.

Backups: Jim Brennan, Milwaukee, 1944-47. Brother of Terry rushed for 250 yards; Willie "Red" Maher, Madison, 1921-23. Set record for most single-game all-purpose yards, 361 vs. Kalamazoo in 1923 (107 rushing, 174 kickoff returns, 80 punt returns).

FULLBACK

Neil Worden, Milwaukee, 1951-53

Worden led the Irish in rushing in 1951 and 1953.

Despite only measuring 5-7 and 145 pounds, quarterback Gus Dorais led Notre Dame to a 24-1-3 record from 1910-13.

PHOTO COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME ARCHIVES

For his career, he totaled 2,039 yards on 476 carries with 29 touchdowns, adding 199 receiving yards on 29 catches. The Irish had a three-year record of 23-4-3 with Worden at fullback, just missing the national title in '53 with a 9-0-1 mark.

Backups: Earl "Curly" Lambeau, Green Bay, 1918. Started as a freshman in his only year with the Irish and scored the first touchdown of the Rockne era; Dick Hanousek, Antigo, 1924-25. One of the "Shock Troops" who started games for 1924 champs at guard, then a fullback in '25.

END

Dave Casper, Chilton, 1971-73

"Ghost" started his Notre Dame career as a tackle before being moved to tight end. He was named the offensive MVP of the 1973 national champions. He made 21 receptions for 335 yards and 4 touchdowns in his career. He is a member of both the Pro and College Football Halls of Fame.

Backup: Paul Host, LaCrosse, 1930-32. Host led the Irish in receiving in 1931 with six catches for 48 yards and 2 touchdowns.

END

Don Penza, Kenosha, 1951-53

A starter in 1952-53 and captain of the 1953 Irish, who finished 9-0-1 and ranked No. 2 in the country, Penza was a fierce two-way competitor who made 19 receptions during his Notre Dame career.

Backup: Frank Kosikowski, Cudahy, 1946-47. Played for the Fleet City Navy service champions in World War II, then as a capable reserve behind Heisman Trophy winner Leon Hart.

TACKLE

Joe Kurth, Madison, 1930-32

Kurth was a three-year starter, including for the 1930 national champions, after transferring from Wisconsin. He earned consensus All-America honors in 1931 and was a unanimous All-American in 1932.

Backup: Ralph "Zipper" Lathrop, Fennimore, 1911-14. Played on the Irish line with Rockne as starting right tackle in 1913.

TACKLE

Fred Miller, Milwaukee, 1926-28

Captain of the 1928 Fighting Irish, Miller received All-America recognition as a senior in 1928.

Backup: Steve Neece, Janesville, 1973-74. Starting left tackle for 1973 national champs.

GUARD

Tom Regner, Kenosha, 1964-66

Regner first gained fame as a defensive lineman. In 1964, he led Irish linemen with 68 tackles. Paving the way for powerful Irish running game in 1966, Regner earned consensus All-America honors.

Backup: Torgus "Turk" Oaas, Merrill, 1910-11. Played on the Notre Dame line with Knute Rockne.

GUARD

Richard "Red" Smith, Combined Locks, 1925-26

The versatile Smith played both right guard and fullback for the 1926 Fighting Irish. He also captained the Notre Dame baseball team.

Backup: Neil Flinn, Superior, 1922. Better known as a top Notre Dame hockey player.

CENTER

John Pick, West Bend, 1900-01

Pick was the backup in 1900 and the starter in 1901, when Notre Dame went 8-1-1 and was declared Indiana state champion.

Backup: Mike Kafka, Antigo, 1974. A reserve on Ara Parseghian's final Notre Dame team.

DEFENSIVE END

Brian Beidatsch, Milwaukee, 2002-05

A reliable backup at both defensive end and tackle.

DEFENSIVE END

Jeff Lueken, Racine, 1979-81

Lueken brought size and strength to his reserve role on the Irish line.

DEFENSIVE TACKLE

Jim Flanigan, Sturgeon Bay, 1990-93

Flanigan led Southern Door High School to a state championship in 1989. At Notre Dame, he teamed with Bryant Young on a stout defensive line that helped the Irish go 21-2-1 in 1992 and 1993.

Backup: Greg Pauly, Waukesha, 2001-04, Developed to become a starter in 2004.

DEFENSIVE TACKLE

Kevin Nosbusch, Milwaukee, 1972-74

A vital cog on the defensive line for the 1973 national champs, Nosbusch had 139 career tackles, 16 for loss.

LINEBACKER

Bob Olson, Superior, 1967-69

A two-time captain in 1968-69, Olson was a tackling machine with 369 career stops. The team MVP as a senior, Olson led the Irish in tackles all three seasons, while becoming a second-team All-American.

LINEBACKER

Pete Johnson, Fond du Lac, 1974-78

Johnson was a capable backup behind Irish stars Doug Becker and Bob Golic, and a member of the 1977 national champions.

LINEBACKER

Phil Johnson, Fond du Lac, 1977-78

He followed brother Pete as an all-state player in Wisconsin, then on to the Fighting Irish as a steady reserve.

DEFENSIVE BACK

Charles "Gus" Dorais

A fearless defender, the pint-size Dorais had an eagle eye for opponents headed his way.

DEFENSIVE BACK

Jim Crowley

"Sleepy Jim" gave the impression of being disinterested — until it was time to stop the play.

Jim Crowley earned All-America honors as one of the members of the famous Four Horsemen backfield for the 1924 national champs.

PHOTO COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME ARCHIVES

DEFENSIVE BACK

Terry Brennan

In addition to his offensive exploits, in 1946 Brennan made a key interception when the second-ranked Irish played to a 0-0 tie against No. 1 Army at a packed Yankee Stadium in a matchup dubbed "The Game of the Century."

DEFENSIVE BACK

Ross Christensen, Racine, 1974-77

Backed up Jim Browner at strong safety for the 1977 national champions and contributed 10 tackles.

PUNTER

Vince Phelan, Racine, 1986-87.

Averaged 40.7 yards on 51 punts.

KICKER

Jim Crowley

Made 20 conversions for the 1924 national champions.

HOLDER

Greg Knaflec, Green Bay, 1977-79

A backup quarterback to Joe Montana, Knaflec became a reliable special teams player.

Jim Lefebvre is an award-winning Notre Dame author and leads the Knute Rockne Memorial Society. He can be reached at: jim@ndfootballhistory.com

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No Signs Of Slowing Down

The sustained recruiting surge for Notre Dame football didn't happen by accident.

The class of 30 recruits that signed to play for head coach Marcus Freeman in the 2026 recruiting cycle comprised a group that finished in the program's highest position in the Rivals Industry Team Recruiting Rankings, which has been retroactively applied through 2004. Notre Dame's No. 2 ranking in the 2026 cycle set a new standard in the internet recruiting coverage era.

Notre Dame's best class finish in the Rivals Industry Team Recruiting Rankings previously was No. 4, which occurred three times: 2006, 2008 and 2013. Head coach Charlie Weis managed to take advantage of a successful 2005 season. He sandwiched a fifth-ranked class in 2007 between his best two classes.

Head coach Brian Kelly turned Notre Dame's run to the BCS National Championship Game to conclude the 2012 season into a coveted 2013 class. But the Irish couldn't keep up that level of recruiting and dropped down to No. 11 in the 2014 cycle.

Freeman has made sure Notre Dame doesn't suffer a dip in recruiting in the 2027 cycle. The Irish entered August with the No. 2-ranked class in the country, which consists of 23 commitments, and it might be better than the 2026 class.

Notre Dame might be amid the program's recruiting peak for the 21st century, but the Irish are proving it's more sustainable than an outlier.

"There's so many different people and departments I can point to," Notre Dame head coach Marcus Freeman said. "Our administration and the support through NIL. Our recruiting and scouting department led by [general manager] Mike Martin and their ability to not only identify talent but to attract the talent and to develop the relationships with those guys. To our position coaches and coordinators.

After landing the No. 2 recruiting class nationally in 2026, head coach Marcus Freeman and his staff had the second-best collection of 2027 recruits heading into August.

PHOTO BY CHAD WEAVER

"People misconstrue this like it's just money-driven now. No, it's not. It's relationships. The top teams are going to probably offer this guy the same amount of money. When everything is equal, then that's where relationships matter."

Notre Dame football is undoubtedly competing at the top level in terms of funding expectations in NIL and revenue sharing. When On3 national college football insider Pete Nakos surveyed general managers, agents and NIL collectives across college football in June, Notre Dame was among four other schools — Texas A&M, Miami, Oregon and Texas Tech — perceived to be top spenders in the recruiting cycle.

But if programs are making similar offers to recruits, there must be something that separates one school from the others. That's where the messaging and the messengers still matter.

"The other thing is, for me, a strong belief and conviction in what you're offering people," Freeman said. "I truly say this. There's not a better place to play college football and be a student than Notre Dame. I believe that. And I hope everybody that's discussing the opportunity at Notre Dame has that same conviction, because we have to make sure they feel the passion we have for this place. And what it can do — I'm talking to you guys as parents — for your child beyond the game of football.

"Certain kids, right away, you go, 'He's not interested in that.' It helps us go, OK, let's use our attention and efforts and energy on guys who might want this. The ability to identify that sooner, the quicker we can do that, the more we can spend time and energy on a guy that is interested in that.

"It's a collaborative group. It's not me. There's so many. It takes all of us to do this."

Finding out if Notre Dame aligns with what a recruit is interested in requires a lot of legwork and conversations that happen earlier in the process. Notre Dame has already offered more than two dozen 2029 recruits who will play their sophomore seasons this fall.

Offering recruits that early can be a bit of a guessing game. But the Irish are trying to be as well informed as possible when furthering the recruitment of a prospect. Martin, director of player evaluations Matt Jansen and director of football strategy Anthony Treash even use analytics in helping add some science to the art of recruiting.

"They use it in evaluation of high school prospects," Freeman said. "I think it maybe can expedite the process. I don't want to be 100 percent depending on analytics. There's a human eye, an element to it; there's conversations.

"What Treash, Jansen and Mike Martin can do utilizing analytics to kind of expedite the process can really help us. It can help us identify a prospect who maybe isn't well known. I think it is a huge benefit to what we're doing."

Recent results suggest the process is working for Notre Dame. With Freeman leading the program, it's hard to imagine it going any other way. ✦

Tyler James has been covering Notre Dame athletics since 2011. He can be reached on X @ TJamesND

OFF THE DOME JACK SOBLE

The Wrong And Right About Notre Dame's Schedule

It's that time of year again: People have opinions about Notre Dame's schedule, and most of them are not positive.

Plenty of college football fans love to hate the Irish, and said haters typically pounce on any opportunity to say Notre Dame plays nothing but cupcakes. The truth is, those who complain about Notre Dame's 2026 schedule are neither entirely wrong nor entirely right.

Blue & Gold Illustrated parses fact from fiction regarding popular criticisms here.

What The Haters Get Right: Notre Dame's 2026 Schedule Is Weak

The most generous term you can use to describe Notre Dame's 2026 schedule is top heavy. Miami should be in the national championship mix again, BYU enters the season with legitimate playoff aspirations, and some believe SMU can make a dark-horse run as well.

The rest of it? Oh boy.

Eight of the remaining nine teams Notre Dame faces this season lost eight or more games in 2025. The ninth is Navy, whom the Irish defeated by an average of 41 points per game in their last three matchups. While 2026 is obviously a new season, it does not look like many of those eight-loss teams will experience immediate turnarounds.

What The Haters Get Wrong: Notre Dame's Schedule Is Not Uniquely Weak Among Contenders

Going off ESPN's FPI, Notre Dame's schedule is the second-worst among the top 10 teams in college football. It ranks 56th, ahead of Texas Tech (71st) and in the ballpark of Miami (45th). Indiana's schedule (33rd) and Oregon's (26th) also fall outside the top 25.

Meanwhile, two other teams with College Football Playoff goals have schedules that rank either worse than or similar to Notre Dame's — Penn State at No. 62 and BYU at No. 55.

If the Irish were in the ACC, their schedule would rank 14th out of 18 teams. If they were in the Big 12, it would rank 10th out of 17. The point is, while Notre Dame's schedule is certainly on the low end of Power Four teams, it's not an outlier by any stretch of the imagination.

A close loss to Miami left a College Football Playoff berth out of reach for the Irish in 2025, and the same thing could happen again in 2026 due to another top-heavy schedule.

PHOTO COURTESY MIAMI ATHLETICS

The idea that a proud program playing a bad schedule is a phenomenon unique to Notre Dame is complete nonsense.

What The Haters Get Wrong: The Irish Do Not "Hand-Pick" Their Schedule

The retort you often see when Notre Dame fans and writers make this argument is, "Notre Dame deserves more criticism because it hand-picks its schedule. Everyone else's is created by their conference." That statement falls somewhere between extremely misleading and just not true.

The Irish face an average of five ACC teams per season. This year, they play six. Two of their ACC opponents — Miami and SMU — are the runaway favorites to play for the conference title. The other four, according to the preseason media poll, are the projected four worst teams in the conference.

Those opponents are chosen by the ACC as part of an annual rotation. It is not Notre Dame's fault that the majority are supposed to be terrible.

The remaining six games are indeed scheduled independently by the Irish, but that fact requires a great deal of context. When Notre Dame scheduled Wisconsin and Michigan State, it did not think those programs — both of which have five 10-win seasons over the past 15 years — would be at historical low points.

What The Haters Get Wrong: Notre Dame's Schedule Does Not Automatically Make The Irish Overrated

This should not be necessary to say out loud, but Take Culture does what it does.

Obviously, you can only play the teams in front of you. According to the CFP rankings, the best team Notre Dame defeated when it won 10 straight regular-season games after falling to Northern Illinois in 2024 was Army. Last year, Indiana only beat one team that finished the regular season ranked. None of that mattered in December and January.

You might hear some noise to the contrary during the fall, so let me spell it out right here: A 12-0 or 11-1 Notre Dame team will make the College Football Playoff, no questions asked. And the Irish should be considered a real threat to make a run when they do.

What The Haters Get Right: But It Does Reduce Their Margin For Error

However, what if Notre Dame goes 10-2 with losses to Miami at home and BYU on the road? In that event, the schedule would have to come back into play.

Think about what happened last year, ignoring the committee's wildly inconsistent logic, the nonsensical swap at the end and the strange insistence to keep Alabama afloat. Strip all of that away and just look at Notre Dame's résumé. The Irish went 10-2 with losses to the two best teams they played — including their only direct, side-by-side comparison against a bubble team — and their best win came at home over No. 16 Southern Cal. That résumé absolutely put them at risk of missing the CFP, despite most metrics rating them as a title contender.

A 10-2 mark with losses to Miami and BYU would give Notre Dame more or less the same résumé, assuming SMU lands somewhere in the back half of the top 25.

That's where the schedule hurts because the Irish have fewer chances to earn quality wins. Because their list of opponents is so top heavy, they must take advantage of the opportunities they have. ✦

Staff writer Jack Soble has covered Notre Dame athletics for *Blue & Gold Illustrated* since August 2023. Contact him at Jack.Soble@on3.com.

THE DEEP READ ERIC HANSEN

Charles Jagusah's Comeback Matters To Notre Dame

If Charles Jagusah's college football career had played out the way his recruiting rankings suggested that it could, there's a plausible scenario in which the redshirt junior offensive lineman's time in a Notre Dame uniform would already be over.

And the 6-foot-5, 330-pounder would be competing for a starting spot in an NFL training camp somewhere, as a successful three-and-out draft early entry.

Instead, he'll be trying to push the possibility of becoming one of college football's great comeback stories in 2026 while he continues to work toward transcending a third serious injury during his college career that encompasses all of three games and five inconsequential plays in a fourth.

Injuries have limited Jagusah to action in only four games in his three seasons with the Irish.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL MILLER

"I do believe he will play for us at some point," Irish fifth-year head coach Marcus Freeman told a small group of reporters July 21 in his annual sit-down with the Notre Dame core beat media. "I don't know when. Actually, if you asked me to bet, I would hope it's this season at some point.

"I don't know, though. That's all going to be how his arm continues to strengthen. But there's positive signs. There's very positive signs."

And there finally has been a long stretch of those since mid-March, when the Rock Island, Ill., native underwent his sixth surgery in an eight-and-a-half-month span following a broken left humerus. Jagusah suffered the injury in 2025 on the Fourth of July weekend in a UTV incident while hanging out with teammates in Wyoming.

He was projected as Notre Dame's starting right offensive guard for the 2025 season at the time of the mishap and still is widely considered the Irish lineman with the highest potential — if/when he returns to playing football.

And yet Notre Dame training camp was set to kick off Aug. 6, with the former five-star prospect still on the sidelines, but with real momentum for a return.

"He's just continuing to rehab and trying to work on strength," Freeman said. "When you're dealing with nerves, you've just got to let Mother Nature take its course. You've got to let science figure itself out."

According to a source, there's less concern about when the nerve completely regenerates and more about the timetable it will take to build back the strength in Jagusah's upper body to the level he was at in the summer of 2025.

"There's two parts to this," the source said. "One is, thank God he's healing. The second part is there's still a lot of work to do. But here's the bottom line. The program is in a position where they don't have to count on him coming back. The guys they have now are that good.

"But if he comes back at some point this season, he brings depth at a minimum and possibly a lot more."

And if Jagusah doesn't come back this season, his comeback-in-progress still has inspirational value. Imagine having a bad day and then looking over at your teammate with an uncertain future while putting in the work as if Notre Dame's bottom line depended on it.

That has been who Jagusah has been all along.

When former Irish offensive line coach Harry Hiestand went to Alleman High to take in a practice during Jagusah's recruitment, he thought he had mistakenly stumbled into an outdoor gym class at the longtime struggling program. Both from a physical size and roster count standpoint.

In fact, since Jagusah's senior season, in which he played half of it with two knee ligament tears, Alleman has won a total of one game and actually scratched playing any varsity games in 2023 and 2024 due to low interest and turnout.

Yet, as Hiestand can attest, when rival high schools tried to recruit Jagusah out of Alleman High, he refused to quit on his teammates.

And he refuses to quit on himself now. If he never plays another down for the Irish, that's still a powerful message to have in your building every day.

Injuries have dominated Jagusah's career to date, though when he has played, he's flashed his elite pedigree. The last two instances came during Notre Dame's final two playoff games of the 2024 season, in January of 2025. He was plugged in as an injury replacement at right guard for Notre Dame's CFP semifinal victory over Penn State and at left tackle for the title game against Ohio State on Jan. 20, 2025.

"Charles is a strong-minded guy," Notre Dame associate athletics director of sports medicine Rob Hunt said back in March. "He's been through a lot. He's had some low times. When you think you're moving forward and you're where you want to be and then you have a setback, that's hard to take on.

"He's relied on his teammates and his coaches. Our sports psychologist has worked really well with him, and it's been beneficial. The growth is in the heart, and Charles is definitely equipped to handle that and has done a really good job managing those emotions and that bumpy road." ✦

Eric Hansen covers Notre Dame athletics for On3, with a focus on Irish football. He can be reached on X @ EHansenND

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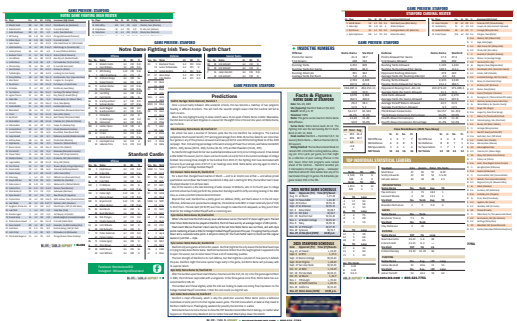

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